

# The Phenomenon of *Yātrā*: A Philosophical Form of Collective Practice

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**Abstract:** The word *Yātrā*, translated from Sanskrit into English, means “journey” or “voyage.” It is often associated with significant and meaningful travel, such as a spiritual journey. *Yātrā* can be understood as both, an outward and inward journey, as it encompasses personal transformation, since every external journey is inherently also an inner one. Moreover, *Yātrā* implies collectiveness, especially in the context of spiritual pilgrimages, since it is often undertaken by groups of people joined in compassion, devotion, shared joy, growth, love, and united in difficult times. The *Rajasthan Kabir Yātrā* is rooted in the Bhakti and *Sufi* poetry of mystic saints such as Kabir, Mirabai, Bulleh Shah, and others, who are known for their devotion to love, equality, and the rejection of rigid rituals and rules. This article draws parallels between the *Rajasthan Kabir Yātrā* and the students’ long walks taking place in Serbia in 2025. I recognize these as a form of Student *Yātrā*—a journey of togetherness, care, love, and devotion—expressing a radical aesthetic of community.

**Key-words:** Kabir *Yātrā*; Bhakti; *Sufism*; philosophical practice; aesthetics of community;

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## **Introduction**

The word *yātrā*, translated from Sanskrit to English, means journey or voyage. It is often associated with significant and meaningful travel, such as a spiritual journey. *Yātrā* can be understood as both, an outward and inward journey, as it encompasses personal transformation, since every external journey is inherently also an inner one. Moreover, *Yātrā* implies collectiveness, especially in the context of spiritual pilgrimages, since it is often undertaken by groups of people joined in compassion, devotion, shared joy, growth, love, and united in difficult times. This article takes up two such *Yātrās*, the *Rajasthan Kabir Yātrā* in India and the Student long walks taking place in Serbia in 2025 - as ways of philosophical practice. *Kabir Yātrā* is based on the Bhakti and *Sufi* poetry of mystic saints like Kabir, Mirabai, Bulleh Shah, and others. These mystics, known for their devotion to love, equality, and the rejection of rigid rituals and rules, are remembered and honored through music, poetry, and communal participation. The philosophy of Kabir is one that unites Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, transcending religious boundaries as his poetry emphasizes themes such as unity, love, and devotion. The students' long walks in Serbia, which began in early 2025 as a protest against the tragic collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station that killed 16 people on November 1, 2024, represent a novel form of student-initiated protest. This *yātrā* has spanned thousands of kilometers across Serbia and even extended into parts of Europe. It was not merely a protest walk, but a movement that brought together a wide range of people, resulting in catharsis and healing of deep wounds inflicted on the people of Serbia over many decades.

## **Journey as a symbol**

In the *Dictionary of Symbols*, written by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, the journey is given quite much importance. It is symbolically meaningful. "Rich in symbolism though journeys may be, this wealth is considered into the quest for truth, peace and immortality, and into the search for and discovery of spiritual CENTRE." (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1996) Here we have the centre and the movement towards the centre. And that seems to be expressed in the pilgrimage towards the Promised Land.

One example (of many pilgrimages towards the promised land) is the Exodus from the Land of Egypt, which was described by Origen as a stage of spiritual development. Other examples are Sufi mystics, such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna), who wrote a *Tale of the Bird*, and Suhrawardi with his *Tale of the Western Exile* and *Letter from Towers*, for whom the quest of a journey is not for their earthly homeland, but for their origin, original, center. Nevertheless, "Journeys [can] give expression to a deep-seated desire for internal change and a need for a fresh range of experience rather than change of location." (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1996) Jung claimed that deep dissatisfaction and a search for new horizons can be seen as a motive for journeys. In world literature, there have been many different examples of journeys presented. Not in each of them is there a traditional symbolism, but they do have significance -moral or satirical - in the quest for truth.

The appeal of transgression, the call of the great outdoors are easily found in the writings of Kerouac or Snyder: Throwing off moronic conventions, the soporific security of four walls, the boredom of the Same, the wear of repetition, the chilliness of the well-heeled and their hatred of change. The need to provoke departures, transgressions, to give substance at last to folly and dreams. The decision to walk (to head somewhere far off, anywhere, to try something else) can be understood this time as the Call of the Wild. (Gros, 2023)

Frédéric Gros, in his book, *A Philosophy of Walking* is explaining about the freedom that comes by walking, as being a temporal disconnection from our everydayness, our routine. It is an escape from it.

### **Who is a pilgrim? Who is the one wandering?**

A pilgrim symbolically represents the person, an individual who, in navigating the trials of earthly existence, aspires toward a transcendent destination, often envisioned as a Promised Land or a Paradise once lost. This symbolic figure is also intimately associated with themes of purification and detachment. The pilgrimage becomes an act of homage to a sanctified figure— Christ, Muhammad, Buddha or Ram —whose spiritual legacy has consecrated the place of pilgrimage. In this way, pilgrimage

becomes more than a physical journey — it is a spiritual initiation, preparing the pilgrim for enlightenment and divine truth. Ultimately, it marks a deep identification with the chosen spiritual guide and a profound transformation of the self. It is always outside of a comfort zone, outside of conformity, in every sense, as it is something extraordinary, that has not been done before. Even if the place that one is going is the same, the journey never is.

### **Kabir and *VIŚIṢṬĀDVAITA***

Kabir is one of the most well-known mystics of India, celebrated and loved among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs worldwide. He was raised in a Muslim family, near Banares (present day Varanasi), in the 15th century. But where it becomes interesting is that later in life, he becomes a disciple of Ramananda. Ramananda brought the teachings of Ramanuja to North India. Ramanuja, who lived in the 12th century, was the founder of *Viśiṣṭādvaita*, a school of *Vedānta* philosophy, as a response to the already established rigidity of interpretation of Sankara's *Advaita*. This took place during a period when the Bhakti movement, which had already spread widely across India between the 6th and 16th centuries, was exerting a strong influence on spiritual and cultural life. In the introduction to the English translation of Kabir's poetry by Tagore, Evelyn Underhill writes:

Ramananda, through whom its [Bhakti movement's] spirit is said to have reached Kabir, appears to have been a man of wide religious culture, and full of missionary enthusiasm. Living at the moment in which the impassioned poetry and deep philosophy of great mystics, Attar, Sadi, Jalalu'ddin Rumi, and Hafiz, were exercising a powerful influence on the religious thought of India, he dreamed of reconciling this intense and personal Mohammedan mysticism with the traditional theology of Brahmanism. (Tagore, Underhill, 1915)

One has to understand the specific role and importance of Kabir in that time, but also in all times since there is a sharp division in the Indian subcontinent among Muslims and Hindus. As the religious exclusivism was very much present, Kabir, who never chose one or the other religion, was a unique or at least, very rare example. His poetry was devotional,

transcending the institutional understanding of religions as such, and he was directly addressing his poetry and music to the God, using different words for his beloved.

...his wonderful songs survive the spontaneous expressions of his vision and his love; and it is by these, not by the didactic teachings associated with his name, that he makes his immortal appeal to the heart. In these poems a wide range of mystical emotions is brought into play from the loftiest abstractions, the most other-worldly passion for the Infinite, to the most intimate and personal realization of God, expressed in homely metaphors and religious symbols drawn indifferently from Hindu and Mohammedan belief. (Tagore, Underhill, 1915)

This explanation given by Underhill maybe simple, yet so precise of what is the core of *Viśiṣṭādvaita*, also called “qualified monism”. There is no exclusion of the *worldly* and *unworldly* in the context of God, abstract does not exclude concrete, and love for God does not exclude very personal, intimate love for women/men. It all goes together, as not being separated - nor it is possible, nor it should be. “It is impossible to say of their author that he was Brahman or Sufi, Vedantist or Vaishnavite. He is, as he says himself, at once the child of Allah and of Ram.” (Tagore, Underhill, 1915)

If God be within the mosque, then to whom does this world belong?  
If Ram be within the image which you find upon your pilgrimage,  
then who is there to know what happens without?  
Hari is in the East: Allah is in the West. Look within your heart, for  
there you will find both Karim and Ram;  
All men and women of the world are His living forms.  
Kabir is the child of Allah and of Ram: He is my Guru,  
He is my Pir. (Kabir, translated by Tagore, 1915)

Kabir never adopted the ascetic way of life; he was married, and was working as a weaver. He did not follow the strictness and rigidity of Vedantins nor Muslims, as he rejected those as unnecessary for the act of love towards God - “and it was out of the heart of the common life that he sang his rapturous lyrics of divine love.” (Tagore, Underhill, 1915)

## **The experience of Rajasthan Kabir Yātrā**

*Rajasthan Kabir Yātrā* was founded in 2012. Last year, the event took place between 2nd and 6th October in five different places in Rajasthan - Bikaner, and the rural regions of Marwar in India. This event follows the idea and vision of *Yātrās* happening in the region centuries ago, and these *yātrās* were related to music, poetry, storytelling, where musicians, poets, and *yātris* were going together from village to village, where they were singing and reciting in the spirit of communal harmony and unity. "Rajasthan Kabir Yatra has evolved into the country's premier Folk music festival, showcasing the rich traditions of Sant-Vaani from across the country." (Rajasthan Kabir Yatra, n.d.) *Sant Vaani*, which translates to "Saints' Sayings" or "Words of the Saints" refers to a collection of devotional songs and verses by various saints, particularly those within the *Sant Mat* tradition. *Sant Mat* is translated to English as "Path of the Saints" which means teachings of the Saints, rooted in the Bhakti movement. The teachings emphasize a deeply personal and loving inner devotion of the individual soul (*Atma*) toward the Supreme Divine Reality (*Paramatma*). The emergence of the first generation of North Indian saints—among them Kabir and Ravidas—took place around the mid-15th century in the Benares region. They were preceded by influential figures such as Namdev and Ramananda, active during the 13th and 14th centuries.

"This unique festival brings together local, regional, and national artists, offering a diverse array of performances ranging from folk and classical to electronic and acoustic interpretations of age-old poetry." (Rajasthan Kabir Yatra, n.d.)

One of the greatest beauties of *Yātrā* was the unity among religions, first of all among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. The journey in older times took even months, as it was done on foot. "Walking ends by awakening this rebellious, archaic part of us: our appetites become rough and uncompromising, our impulses inspired. Because walking puts us on the vertical axis of life: swept along by the torrent that rushes just beneath us." (Gros, 2023) *Yātrā* today is a very unique experience and takes five days,

where organizers were taking care of our collective transport and stay, mostly quite modest, where the villagers were preparing food for us. There is tremendous diversity in this – people from different age groups, different parts of India, religions – both among the musicians and the participants. Many of them were also locals, which gave an authenticity to the event. The journey was more oriented to the inner one, to the vertical one, to the center, towards origin.

As the music played is devotional, it is always uplifting, and in that togetherness, we were experiencing ecstatic moments, transcending time and space. It was a collective practice, where we were not intending some goals, some future, but the present moment was easily accessible, more real. As pointed out by Tagore, the “real” is not just the tangible, material world. It is rather the spiritual truth, the unity behind all things—something art could evoke more directly than science. Art is “the response of man's creative soul to the call of the Real.” (Tagore, 2015) *We, yātris*, were just there, away from the roles we are taking in our everyday life.

Concerts in the evening, going late into the night, with many artists coming from all around India, among them many locals, were always bringing unity, were it Bangali local musician singing in Bengali, or somebody from Karnataka in Kannada language, where could be heard Tamil, Gujarati or Urdu. The important aspect of the Bhakti saints was a revival of vernacular languages through poetry, interpretations, and music. They were singing and reciting in local languages, which the common people could understand and identify with. Before the Bhakti movement, Sanskrit was the main language in which the most important scriptures were written, which only *pandits* (priests) could understand. As this was a proper Bhakti event, many artists were singing in their local languages with their local themes.

The difference between classical Indian music and folk is that folk is less bound by rigid rules, simpler in structure, so it can cover poems of great saints, like Kabir, and others, and local stories, where classical is mainly *ragas* which are melodic frameworks, often related to nature (for example, there is morning *raga*, evening *raga*, season *raga*), or to the epic themes from *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* or *Puranas*. Classical Indian music is formal, has roots in chants and scriptures, whereas folk Indian music originates from local communities and traditions. *Qawwali*, on the other hand, which was very much present at *Yātrā*, is also related to Bhakti and

Bhakti movement, mostly sung in Urdu, and differs from classical Indian music. Still, very often, masters in those fields know both. *Qawwali* should induce a spiritual state *wajd*, a state of spiritual ecstasy, a deeper inner experience of the Divine often described as a moment of losing oneself in the presence of God. “Ecstasy, for instance, is as common a feature of mystical conversion as of the last crisis, or “mystic marriage” of the soul”. (Underhill, 2002) *Qawwali* is *sufi* devotional music, very often singing some of the best world poetry, where Kabir belongs too, and there are other poets like Amir Khusrau, Bulleh Shah, Omar Khayyam, Rumi, Hafiz and among them always mentioned Mansur Al-Hallaj.

### **Students' YĀTRĀ**

Today in Serbia, we are witnessing one of the largest and longest ongoing protests in Europe—perhaps even in the world. These protests have continued for ten consecutive months (at this moment of writing), since the tragic collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station, which killed 16 people on November 01 2024— a consequence of systemic corruption. Since that moment, students in Serbia started their journey and started the process of healing the whole country. While we will not be able to delve into the details of this extraordinary and unique movement I this paper, I want to highlight one powerful aspect of the movement: the Students' long walks across the country. The approximate number of kilometers - which is still far from the real number as it takes only walking from and to the University cities - is 2,450 km. They were running from Novi Sad, Serbia to Brussels, Belgium for 1,675 km and cycling from Novi Sad to Strasbourg, France for 1,312 km in 13 days.

These students have walked thousands of kilometers—from city to city, through villages and towns, during both, winter and spring. Their walks have been marked by incredible resilience, joy, and determination. They sang, danced, and walked with playfulness, dancing, and singing throughout. This phenomenon can be seen as Students' *Yātrā*. I spoke with a few of them to learn about their experience. These walks often covered 30 to 40 kilometers a day, taking three or four days to complete routes of 100 kilometers, with only short nightly rests before continuing. When journey was longer, then it took more days in the row. Along their paths, local people in the towns and villages awaited them with open arms—

welcoming them with joy, as if they were welcoming freedom itself, something long lost. They prepared food and gave water, offered shelter, and shared whatever they had. It became a deep process of healing, a connection among people who had never met before and might never meet again, but who felt, in that moment, that they were not alone, that they were not islands. People were united—across generations, religions, and backgrounds—with care, with humanity. And that changed all of us. Sofija, who walked twice—once from Zrenjanin to Vršac, and again from Vršac to Belgrade—described the physical pain: wounds on her legs, spasms, exhaustion, and the cold. But she said when they were entering villages, everybody was friendly, intimate, and she felt acceptance and care, they felt seen. There was a physical touch of care and through hugging and crying together, as the most intimate connection one can share with another. And during that time, all the pain was vanishing. The energy was so strong and uplifting that the impossible became possible. It was an experience of ecstasy and catharsis.

This beautiful revolution in Serbia is unfolding with gentleness, kindness, and youthful energy—still playful, still unbroken. The students are doing something profoundly important, with a lightness of spirit rooted in joy. Their playfulness is not a distraction—it is the very foundation of their strength. They were walking for hundreds of kilometers, in days-long journeys, in winter, from one city to another, through villages, towns, with bleeding feet, but with their spirit and soul fantastically untouched by those difficulties. They have run thousands of kilometers to Brussels. They have cycled thousands to Strasbourg. And through all of it, they have brought with them togetherness, gentleness, singing, dancing, and joy. They have accomplished what many adults said was impossible. The nobility of their ideas, and the dignity of their actions, embody the true meaning of seriousness—matching the gravity of the situation in Serbia with the purity of their response.

## **Conclusion**

Togetherness, the pure joy of collective existence, where all of us participants were going into a collective catharsis, in the desert of Rajasthan, where despite our individualities, we all were in unison - was a philosophical practice of healing. As stated by one of the student *yātris* in

Serbia, when they entered a village, they felt the warmth of togetherness and intimacy; felt acceptance and care. All the physical pain they had subjected to on their long walk vanished and instead there was a feeling of joy and contentment, much like a play. *Leela* (or play) implies an act that is free, spontaneous, and joyful, carried out without any sense of attachment—much like a child's play. *Leela* is purging. Play, as any form of art, is joyfulness in the name of the beloved, and it is a form of silent surrender. Where philosophy ends, poetry and music begin. But these forms of creativity are not strictly divided, there are no clean cuts, they are all intermingling, interconnected on the level of not being able to separate them. Where one ends and another begins is only the apparent separateness, only our our mental constructions. These can be seen and understood as moments, as Husserl calls the inseparable parts of the whole. (Sokolowski, 2000)

Both these *Yātrās*, the Kabir *Yātrā* and the Student *Yātrā*, integrate the lost pieces of oneself resulting in healing. Maybe not even lost pieces, but pieces that, in the process of living our lives we rejected or set aside. Integration is always happening in the environment of acceptance, care and love - ultimately from oneself. We pay not enough attention to the subtle forms, situations where we feel grounded and ecstatic at the same time. There is the idea of seriousness that excludes play, excludes everything that is connected to the child once was there. Rigidity and seriousness are what is infantile. When those ideas are taken as the idea of how grown-ups should look like and behave, we have to abandon a huge part of us which is playful, gentle, and somehow always already fresh and young. Being young is taken as a part of life which is just a stage until maturity, where one becomes serious, crude, and rigid and to use the metaphor Tarkovsky was using, like an old tree, not flexible. But that means abandoning a huge part of ourselves. Healing happens in the process of realizing that those forms are not sustainable, they are making us feel sick, like we are abandoning ourselves in the name of being grown-ups. Like being grown-up is totally disconnected with the child once was with us. In the playfulness, singing, playing music, dancing, writing and reciting poetry, there is a tremendous fulfillment and return to the vitality of life.

We are not among those who have ideas only between books, stimulated by books - our habit to think outdoors - walking, jumping, climbing, dancing, preferably on lonely mountains or right by the sea where even the paths become thoughtful. Our first question about the value of the book, of a person, or a piece of music is: 'Can they walk?' Even more, 'Can they dance?' (Nietzsche, 2008)

The environment where one can just be and others around just are, is where there is a possibility to integrate the lost or abandoned part/s of ourselves. Being is always already in the world, alongside with other Beings, as Heidegger notes in *Being and Time* (Heidegger; Macquarrie, E. Robinson, Trans, 2001). The nature of such existence, as illustrated by the phenomenon of *Yātrā*, is one that exemplifies a radical aesthetics of community. It goes back to the original sense of the Greeks, as pointed out by Ruth Ronen, regarding political life as "being-in-common". The aesthetic community is one in which "singularities," as discussed by the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in his book *Being Singular Plural*, replace individualities on one hand and collectives on the other. Rather than the individual differences marking off each other or collectives erasing one's unique existence, aesthetic community instantiates our "being-in-common" as different from "common being". It is a radical aesthetic community in so far as it overcomes the conventional, conservative and fossilized identities by replacing those with singularities that form a "being-in-common" in tune with play, with the *Leela*. *Yātrā* exemplifies the philosophical practice of such a radical aesthetic community.

One Love it is that pervades the whole world, few there are who know it fully:

They are blind who hope to see it by light of reason, that reason which is the cause of separation -

The House of Reason is very far away!

How blessed is Kabir, that amidst this great joy he sings

Within his own vessel.

It is the music of the meeting of the soul with soul;

It is the music of forgetting of sorrows;

It is the music that transcends all coming in and all going forth.

(Kabir, translated by Tagore, 1915)

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