

Evocations of the Sea

A recent music concert in Bengaluru, India explored the universal metaphor of the ocean in mystic poetry—a space beyond identity where social divisions such as those of gender, class, caste and race hold little meaning

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(Editor's note: Film maker Shabnam Virmani, and the author of this piece, the poet Vipul Rikhi – singers both - are part of the Kabir Project (www.kabirproject.org), initiated in 2003, which explores contemporary spiritual and socio-political resonances of mystic poets, such as the 15th century north Indian mystic, Kabir, through songs, images and conversations.)

“Evocations of the Sea”—this is how we titled our music concert, which was to be the final session of a 3-day conference on ‘Exploring the Scope of collaborations in Marine Biology and Biotechnology between France and India’, held at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bengaluru, India from 7-9 March 2016, organized jointly by IISc and Dakshin Foundation. When my colleague Shabnam Virmani and I were approached to present an evening of music as part of this conference, we mused upon how the ocean is evoked in the folk music of Kabir and other Bhakti and Baul poets of India.

The sea is a field of mystery, just as life is, and so it becomes a common theme and metaphor within mystic poetry. Life itself is often described as *bhavsagar*, or the ocean of becoming. And we have somehow to cross or navigate this ocean, which throws us about, with skill.

The very first song we presented speaks of an ocean which is full of jewels!

*Your ocean is full of precious jewels
Some brave pearl-diver will bring them up*

The word for pearl-diver in Hindi is *marjeeva*, which literally means one who dies in order to live again. The pearl-diver plunges to his or her death, into the depths of the ocean, and when s/he comes up again, it's as if s/he were born anew. This becomes a powerful spiritual metaphor for Kabir and other poets, to indicate this practice of dying to oneself again and again.

*The pearl-divers' country is a wondrous land
An aimless one can't reach there*

*One on the path knows the diver's pulse
Now she cannot be swayed from her path*

*Giving up the self, she sits in the ocean
And fixes her attention on the pearl
She brings back that beautiful jewel
Now there is no leaving this ocean*

The second song that we sang was also a folk tune from the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh in central India, like the first one. It advises the seeker to ride the waves of the ocean.

*Taste the waves of the ocean, friend
Pearls aren't found by plunging into puddles!*

The depth and vastness of the ocean here becomes a figure for a wider and freer way of being, which has the reward of a ‘pearl’. This is contrasted with much shallower ways of being, clinging to small and limited identities and notions of self.

As both these songs show, the ocean immediately invokes a sense of vastness. Neither Kabir, nor many of the singers who have sung these songs for centuries, lived by the sea. And yet it is a powerful presence in the human imagination, provoking poetry and a sense of the expanse of life.

In January this year we met Dhruv Bhatt, a contemporary poet who writes in Gujarati. As we travelled with him over a period of a few days, he revealed to us how many of his poems ‘come to him’ as songs—that is, along with the tune. Lovingly he taught us these songs, in many of which the ocean is a strong presence. We presented two of his songs as part of the concert, presenting him in some sense as a contemporary mystic poet, and his songs have a strong folk flavour.

The first one is a delightful song which has a story behind it. Once Dhruvdada (elder brother) was doing a walking pilgrimage along the banks of the Narmada, a river considered holy, which originates in central India and flows to the west coast. On a hot day, he came across a poor farmer hard at work, sweating away in his small field. Moved, Dhruv dada approached him and asked him how he was doing. Flashing a thousand watt smile, the farmer looked up at him and said: “I'm full of joy!” It was an unexpected moment of transformation. It shifted something in Dhruvdada's approach to the man, and to himself. And later this poem came to him as a song.

Life is often described as ... the ocean of becoming... we have somehow to cross or navigate this ocean, which throws us about, with skill.

*If, suddenly, I were to come across
Someone on the way
And if they were to ask me
Softly,
“How are you doing today?”
Then I would say,
Nature is so bountiful
And like waves in the ocean
I’m at play!*

When we first heard this song, we were utterly taken with it. It describes the joy and play of the ocean. In fact, the same word in Hindi (*mauj*) can be used for both ‘wave’ and ‘joy’ – and the poet puns on this through the song.

*In my torn trouser-pocket hide
Many joyful, dancing waves
Even when alone
I’m in a carnival each day
...
Water in the eyes comes and goes
But the moistness within never dries
The shore may keep accounts
Of less and more
The ocean doesn’t bother about such scores
The sun may rise and set everyday
The sky over me is always the same*

(See words and translation of the full song here, as well as a downloadable audio version: <http://cityoffeeling.blogspot.in/2016/03/ochintu-koi-raste-made.html>)

The other song of Dhruvdada which we sang also evokes the sea as a place of joy and bounty. On one side, it says, is the ocean with its waves; on the other, is the fertile, green earth. There is joy as far as the eye can see.

We also sang a song of Kabir which describes the journey of a boat. My boat is now sailing smoothly, says Kabir. It has fear

neither of shallow nor of deep waters, no terror of storm or rain, no anxiety of turning upside down. This is because it has found the right navigator, the guru who is guiding its path.

But this guru, the boatman, is a somewhat strange figure.

*Kabir says the one who rows
Without a head
Only he can point out this path
This is an untellable tale
Of great benediction
Only a rare boatman
Can describe it*

And so we arrive into tales of headless boatmen! When we seek to navigate these waters with our limited minds, perhaps we are led astray. But when we give up our need for control and allow ourselves to be guided by something larger, a great benediction appears. Could this be the ‘untellable’ import of this song?

The sixth and final song we presented was a Baul song (from the Bengal region in the east of India) by a famous Baul fakir and poet called Lalon Fakir. It is a call in a simple and full voice. The poet is asking to be ‘taken across’. He says that he cannot see the way. He has been left all alone on this shore, and the sun is setting on the horizon. Things appear dark, and this plea is his only support. In his helplessness, he still finds the strength to call out for help.

We had never before curated a whole concert just around the sea. It was a beautiful experience for Shabnam and me, to immerse in these waters, and perhaps come out on the other shore, refreshed.

(All translations by Vipul Rikhi) ❧