Journeying with Kabir

BHANVA VASANAI

I F YOU were educated in India, you would probably have come across the 15th-century mystic poet-saint Kabir in school as just another text that had to be memorised. That is how Mr Vipul Rikhi first encountered the poet.

Mr Rikhi, who has a master’s degree in literature, admitted that learning Kabir’s poetry in school did not leave a lasting impression on him. It was only when he encountered the poet in the folk tradition that Mr Rikhi met “a totally different Kabir”.

In 2008, he heard folk singer Prashad Tapani, who sings Kabir’s poetry in the Malvi tradition from Madhya Pradesh. He also watched films produced by the Kabir Project, an initiative that journeys into the spiritual and socio-political expressions of Kabir’s poetry in the contemporary world, helmed by film-maker Shabnam Verma. He was struck by “this particular language of Kabir”.

Mr Rikhi, 37, has spent the last 3½ years working with Ms Verma and the Kabir Project, translating poems, working with the music and even writing a set of contemporary parables inspired by Kabir’s songs.

The Kabir Project was started by Ms Verma in 2003. She first came across Kabir in the songs of classical singer Karmic Gandhi when she was in her 20s. Later on, in her work with women’s groups in villages, she heard strains of the poet coming through folk songs.

Her work with the women’s movements made her curious that “there is a knowledge tradition which my education had not introduced to me”. “There was a sense of emptiness, that my convent, English, mainstream education had withheld the wisdom of these folk traditions from me,” explained Ms Verma, who has a master’s degree in development communication and a postgraduate diploma in journalism.

The 49-year-old was in Ahmedabad when the Godhra train burning happened in 2002, and witnessed the anti-Muslim violence that took place. The hatred and the violence that she saw around her sparked her initial impulse to turn to Kabir, as she found that he was expressing how she felt about the situation.

The year after that, she set out to make a series of films on how people from diverse socio-cultural, religious and musical landscapes make meaning in their lives from Kabir’s poetry.

Twelve years, four films and six books with music CDs later, Ms Verma can safely say that she did not expect the Kabir Project to take off the way that it did.

“We had no idea the films would travel so widely, that they would speak as much as they do to so many urban, contemporary Indians and to so many students, that festivals and yatras (processions) would be organised by people inspired by this work. It was not something we set out to achieve,” she said. “It just unfolded.”

The work that the Kabir Project does is vast. Apart from Kabir, it also works on other Sufi and mystic poets like Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. Documents, translations, archives and presents the diverse folk traditions of the various poets, creating films, books and music CDs with their documentation.

It also organises festivals and yatras, bringing folk singers together so that they can learn from each other’s repertoires and traditions.

There is also an educational angle to the Kabir Project, as it is experimenting with bringing this mystic poetry into classrooms.

Along with artist-educator Vasakha Chandan, they have conducted workshops in Madhya Pradesh and Bengaluru, coming up with innovative ways of bringing poetry into the classrooms that do not mimic the couplets in textbooks, “which is typically how Kabir is taught to most Indian students”, explained Ms Verma.

“We are also trying to do it with a sense of play, a sense of challenge, a sense of fun,” she added.

In their short time in Singapore, Ms Verma and Mr Rikhi interacted with students and teachers at Global Indian International School’s Queenstown campus, sharing ideas and images from mystic poetry and discussing how knowledge is understood.

The initiative has also worked with art and design students at Symbiosis Institute of Art, Design and Technology, where Ms Verma is a regular visitor. “A lot of creative animation films, graphic novels, that kind of work, came out of that encounter,” she said.

The Kabir Project is currently working on uploading their material onto a website and a YouTube channel, as part of a web platform known as Ajaib Shahar (wonderful city).

“We realised that the documentation for the four films was so wide and so deep that it was a shame to not put that out there and share it,” said Ms Verma.

On why they chose to make the material available via free platforms, Mr Rikhi, who works on translations of the folk songs, explained that the wisdom that they found through these journeys is like a flowing river that cannot be “dammed up”.

Referring to their recent performances and talks at the Esplanade on April 18 and 19, he said: “The people who came were moved by the music and asked how they can get more of this. So you can put it in a box and tell them that only if you buy this, then you can access it. If we’ve learnt anything from the oral traditions, it’s that wisdom needs to flow.”