I waited until the last minute
to pack. I did have a mental
list ready and knew an hour
would be enough, but did not
want to jinx getting the
confirmation of my tickets by
packing in advance. It was for me
also a test to see whether I was
really supposed to be attending
this Kabir Yatra in Malwa – if it
was so ordained, I would go.

For days I had thought about
how I would document this
journey, planning the photography
equipment I would take. I wanted
a story, a series of images. But all
along at the back of my mind I
knew that you defeat the very
purpose of a journey when you
have a goal at the end of it.
Finally, I decided that I would not
burden myself, I would just take
one camera and one lens and see
where they took me.

After two days as a guest of
the Indian Railways, I ended up at
Ujjain station in the middle of the
night. Even at that hour this
pilgrim destination was humming. I
boarded a local train to Maksi, the
closest station to my final
destination, the small village of
Luniyakhedi. In the compartment
there was not even an inch of
space for either my backpack or
me. The heat, the sweat, the
bodies all crisscrossed in my senses
making me numb. These were the
longest 45 minutes in a long time.
At my station I stumbled out of the
train onto the platform, which was
still dark.

My next means of transport
was a local autorickshaw, whose
driver assured me he knew where I
needed to go. Placing my faith in
his confidence we started down a
muddy gravel path cushioned by a
bed of stones that would have
challenged any four-wheel
suspension system. Just as it was
waking up to the first rays of the
sun I reached my destination – or
perhaps the start of many journeys.
The Kabir Yatra organized by
The Kabir Project from Bengaluru
and the local village committees in
Malwa was an attempt to take the
word and work of the project to
different viewers. The phase of the
project in the heartland of Madhya
Pradesh saw the films on Kabir
made by Shabnam Virmani (the
director of the Kabir Project) being
taken to urban and rural
audiences. Storytelling sessions,
film shows, dance workshops and
musical performances all aimed to
spread Kabir’s message among the
young.

Still in its infancy, the yatra
that started in 2010, this year
managed to attract the likes of
Parvathi Baul, Kailash Kher,
Bhanwari Devi and Shivji Sutar.
Along with them were favourites
from last year such as Mukhtiyar
Ali, Hemant Chauhan, Mooralala
Marwada and, of course, Prahlad
Tipanyaji, who can perhaps be
called the ‘rock star of Malwa’, as
Shabnam calls him in one of her
films.

Those of us who joined the
yatra came from all walks of life –
city slickers as well as villagers who
came together for eight days, with
individual parallel journeys that
might converge one day into a
common goal. Each of us had
within us a story and thoughts on
why Kabir spoke to us.

*Kahat kabir suno bhai
sadho…” Perhaps these were the only words from Kabir’s poems that I remembered from school. My Hindi those days was not good and for a long time I thought ‘sadho’ meant ‘sadhu’, and since sadhus are supposed to know it all, I would wonder who was asking a sadhu to listen to him! But there must have been something in the poetry that resonated, for the name Kabir stayed with me and I always associated him to be a strong secular symbol.

Perhaps it is this need to reaffirm secular ideals that seem to be vanishing, which brought me to the Kabir Yatra. The man himself defies boundaries. His origins, his birth, where and to whom he belonged, all remain a mystery. Sufi Muslims, Hindus and Dalits, all lay claim to him.

The search for truth can take different forms. Across centuries, poets such as Kabir, Rumi, Amir Khusro, Shah Latif and Bulleh Shah have said similar things. In modern times they can be connected to authors like Eckhart Tolle, vipassana teachers like SN Goenka, and to the Dalai Lama. The characters in Shabnam’s films portray subtleties that make viewers question their own staunch or rigid ideas – like Linda Hess, the Zen-practising Kabir scholar, who finds her own personal quest answered in both, and Shubha Mudgal who sings Kabir but at the same time has taken deeksha in a Krishna sect. The dualities shown in the films help us connect on a personal level with the characters, and we are left with questions rather than one clear answer – for perhaps there is never one answer to questions we may have.

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Among these world-renowned names, the rustic, deep raw voices from the rural heartland of Madhya Pradesh seemed to fit right in. It is humbling in many ways to know that you need not possess book knowledge to gain the deepest insights. A fruitseller walks through the song explaining the meaning, or a Muslim singer rebels against the establishment and simply says, “I don’t understand the words of the clerics. The music speaks to me, takes me to the lord.” The ‘lord’ here is inner solace, the guru within, which Prahladji often talks about.

I, personally, have a deep sense of mistrust towards the culture of believing in a guru. It seems to me as if this trust is sometimes misplaced, especially in this modern era that is laced with stories of corruption. Kabir says that the guru could be a revered person, or a teacher you look up...
to, but it also means the guru within, one’s own wisdom that has to be awakened. He speaks of the guru residing within the ‘ghat’, the earthen pot, his metaphor for body-self. This pot holds all that exists. The guru is also in all the sounds, sights and events that jolt us out of the slumber of ignorance. Prahladji often calls the guru a ‘samajh’, an understanding that arises in the heart of our experience and leads us from darkness to light.

**Kabira gyan bichar bin hari dhundhan ko jaye**
*Tan mein tirloki basey ab tak parkha naye.*

(You are searching for God without proper thinking and knowledge. He is there within you, but you haven’t yet been able to see that.)

At the Malwa Kabir Yatra you could see the elements trying to come together. The characters from the films on Kabir were no longer celluloid portrayals, but people you could interact with, who felt Kabir. One of the central figures among them is Prahlad Tipanya, who not only anchors many important elements of the films but also comes across as a teacher, a guru to many. It is his claim as a non-guru that draws people to him.

The journey had its share of physical challenges. About 80 of us travelled in two buses through eight districts of Malwa in eight days. It was hot – incredibly hot! Our throats were parched, as thirsty as the dry landscape we passed. Cramped at times, every inch of physical space had to be shared. Nothing was our own, we all adjusted and shared. Sleep was elusive for many, the journey especially tough when we were on the road right after an all-night satsang. But of all the challenges, the physical discomfort is not something I remember – I expected and accepted that. Words hold the key to understanding, but we have to hear them, understand what lies beyond them... That is something that remains in my consciousness even today - phrases from Kabir’s poetry, which resonated in the yatra.

**Laalan ki nahin boriyan, hansan ke nahin paat**
*Sinhan ke nahin lehade, aur sadhu na chale jamaat.*

(Rubies don’t fill sacks, swans don’t fly in flocks
Lions don’t roam in herds, and a true seeker walks alone.)

Haan kahun to hai nahin, naa bhi kahyo nahin jaaye
*Haan aur naa ke beech mein, moraa sadguru raha samaaye.*

(If I say ‘yes’ it isn’t so, yet I cannot say it’s ‘no’
My true guru resides somewhere between that yes and no)

One interaction remains deep in me, a conversation with a nomad family just before the start of an all-night concert. I was invited to dinner at their home, which for that night was under a tree. The man asked me, “Are you a seeker?” I said, “I want to know – I’m not sure I am a seeker.”

Promising to continue the conversation later I left, not to find them again that night. The confidence with which he had nodded and said, “I too follow this path,” told me he could share more, tell me more. The confidence on his face spoke...
As co-founder of Drishti Media, Shabnam Virmani is today the one behind the Kabir Project, documenting journeys of various people, including Prahlad Tipanya, and the organizer of the Kabir Yatra that is becoming an annual feature in Malwa.

Shabnam Virmani’s journey with Kabir started as the events of Godhra unfolded in 2002. The event had sparked off a frenzy, a violent inferno in Gujarat. Unable to comprehend the violence that existed in ‘us’, it was Kabir’s words that spoke to her and comforted her. ‘Sadho, dekho jag baurana (Oh seekers, see the world’s gone mad with hatred and violence).’

The journey that originated from these thoughts made her search for Kabir in various forms, exploring how his poetry engages with questions of cultural identity, secularism, religion, death, impermanence, and folk and oral traditions. Shabnam started her career as a journalist, whose story on life of Prahlad Tipanya offered to the audience. In Auroville next April – for this project, for Kabir is not a static. As those involved with the project evolve, so will their encounter. Shabnam has started to weave in other poets who deliver the same message but in another form. The spiritual significance of Shah Latif’s poetry, expressed in most touching down-to-earth words, is slowly merging into the Kabir project.

These words are however not separate from the core of the project, for Kabir is not a still identity of a man but the symbol of a collective. The project has a life of its own now and follows a path of education and constant dialogue. While nurturing the next phase of The Kabir Project, Shabnam hopes to take on the challenge of perhaps writing a book, or perhaps combine her love for film as a medium with writing. The path of Kabir is not volumes. But alas, the short interaction ended right there. Or perhaps it was exactly what it was meant to be – a seed to reconnect. I often apologetically said, and continue to say, “I don’t know,” to questions about my understanding of the world. Days after the yatra, at a lunch meeting, Shabnam said, “Stop saying that phrase apologetically. Say with conviction: That you don’t know, you are doing your part to find the answers. Who knows on this planet all that there is to be known.”

Starting off as a reporter and a documentary filmmaker, Shabnam Virmani is today the one behind the Kabir Project, documenting journeys of various people, including Prahlad Tipanya, and the organizer of the Kabir Yatra that is becoming an annual feature in Malwa.