Synthesis of Discussions at the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014

Session: Women's Voice in Mystic Poetry
Gender Roles in Medieval Indian Bhakti and Sufi Spiritual Poetry

16th century Bhakti saint from West Bengal, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and his followers singing and dancing in praise of Lord Krishna
The session ‘Women’s Voice in Mystic Poetry,’ held during the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014 — Men and Boys for Gender Justice, held in New Delhi from November 10-13, 2014, ruminated on Indian medieval era Bhakti and Sufi poetry and songs of poet-saints Mirabai and Kabir in particular replete with verses of love and surrender towards the ‘beloved’. As moderator Bulbul Dhar, professor of political science, Jamia Millia, New Delhi, said, “Often this Beloved, or God, is cast in an implicitly male role, while the poet adopts a feminine voice or persona to express love and surrender. This session explores whether these poems reflect the limitations of traditional gender roles, and in fact reinforce them? Or do these poems also resist and defy binary gender identities? Or both?” These ideas were illuminated through live music and conversation.

THE GENDER MOTIF IN MYSTIC POETRY

Vipul Rikhi, writer, singer and translator from India said, “In the poetry of Bhakti and Sufi poets like Kabir we encounter a certain gender motif. Why do these mostly male poets adopt a female voice and persona? They are constantly referring to their ‘sajani’ or female friend. In English you don’t have this distinction between male and female friend, whereas in Indian languages words like ‘sakhi’ and ‘saheli’ denote a female friend, expressing intimacy between women, a communion not available to men. Therefore these poets take on a female voice and address the ‘sajani’, ‘sakhi,’ or ‘saheli;’ then they’re able to be tender, vulnerable, weak and speak of longing and loss.

“In this song he speaks (singing), naino mein kajra prem ka (I line my eyes with the kohl of love), satya ka sindoor leharaye (I put the sindoor of truth), paanch-pacheez gale ghungra ho ji (and I wear a necklace of five senses and 25 sense objects) – he’s saying something metaphysical, but at the same time he’s using a very female experience to describe it – paanch rattan kari haar (the five jewels or elements which make up the entire world have become my pendant), El kinaare sundar khadi ho j (I have made myself beautiful and I am standing on the side), piyu ji … paar (and my beloved is standing on the other side and we’re gazing at each other). So Kabir is a woman welcoming her beloved. Why is he not saying this as a man? Why does he have to become a woman to say this?

Culturally and through conditioning men are deprived in ways not fully articulated. We’re used to seeing men as oppressors, but we also need to see how they’re oppressed themselves. I see subtle deprivations and oppressions in my own life, in not being able to be vulnerable, not being able to speak in an emotional way and having to conform to a male behaviour which does not allow me to be weak or not in control. For example in Amir Khusro’s famous poem “Ae ri sakhi more khwaja ghar aaye, bhaag lage more aangan ko,” he’s speaking as a woman to another woman – My lord has come home and my home is blessed.

“The oppression boys and men go through since childhood is insidious; it’s not as visible or articulated as the oppression suffered by women. Perhaps that’s why it’s difficult for men to engage. They’re made to believe they’re in power, privileged, rulers of the world, but actually it’s not quite that way. And in this song that I will sing now, Kabir adorns himself – another experience that men don’t have normally. Why should this be denied to us?
Shabnam Virmani

“Just as women have beauty myths to live up to, men have a macho image to live up to. There’s intense pressure and there’s also a lack of being able to speak about certain things.”

DEVOTIONAL SINGING AS EMPOWERING BOTH SEXES

Rikhi added, “Why a session through singing? Understanding takes place not only through the mind; there are other ways of communicating and of knowledge. Mainstream paradigms privilege certain intellectual types of people but we wanted to share songs because this is another way of knowing.”

Shabnam Virmani, artist and documentary film maker, Srishti School of Design and Technology, India, said “It’s remarkable how this poetry in subtle ways enables and empowers both genders. Vipul spoke of how the poet is able to access emotions otherwise not available to him as a man, but also for women this poetry is replete with images that signal their radical autonomy from households. “It’s interesting how women in rural, patriarchal households use the singing space to negotiate power for themselves. Women’s assertion to do ‘satsang’ (devotional singing in community groups) is not met with encouragement and the very act of going out of the house is rebellion from its structures. Satsang is also an autonomous space from the cares of the household. Ultimately, it’s an act of piety difficult to refuse after a point. I also sense an emotional energy in women when they sing texts of Kabir that speak to the heart of the women’s experience.”

Rikhi said, “Part of our thinking through these songs is about how experience becomes gendered; why are certain experiences only for one gender, like adoring yourself or being vulnerable? Why are some other experiences meant for the other gender? It becomes clear how men are trained to be strong. And what does it mean to be strong? And why should men only be strong? Part of it seems to be to identify strength with the mind, because the mind tries to control, whereas spiritual poetry is about letting go rather than controlling.

Let’s stop looking at the space of music, culture, poetry as inaction, entertainment, while the real space of political action lies elsewhere. It’s not like that. There’s deep transformation happening here. The word ecstasy comes from ‘extasis’ — standing outside your received sense of self; losing your markers. That is why music threatens structured religion — it makes you lose your sense of being Muslim, Sikh or this or that. The spirit of Bhakti and Sufi music shake structured systems. The satsang is your political action, because you are transforming yourself. Your energy is radiating outward and back in some way.”
Mystic poetry points to another way of being. The mind has its place, but it’s not the eminent. Men grow up feeling cut off from their own heart, in one sense. It’s a deep feeling of sadness and deprivation, which is not given a name even. To see the masculine experience in this light is to see why so much violence and fear comes about. Men’s traditional gender roles cut off experiences of giving, nurturing, caring.

In Bhakti poetry the poets always talk about feeling. So two things are more important than your mind – the body and the feeling. Wisdom in the body and wisdom of feeling.*

**EXPERIENCING THE FREEDOM OF SURRENDER**

Singing a song, Rikhi explains, “Kabir says not one drop of love has touched you in reading book after book. Reading the four letters of love is all you need to become wise. It’s not something to be read in books or to watch from far away. When the bride and the groom meet, they don’t care about the wedding party anymore. So, it’s an experience, it’s not intellectual, it’s not abstract, it’s in the body."

Virmani added that most Sufi and Bhakti poets belonged to Dalit communities which worked with their hands. They were cobblers, tailors, weavers etc. “They have something in common there with women in their day to day life. Very common are household metaphors of henna on women’s hands or milk being churned. In a lovely couplet Kabir says, “If you must learn the art of meditation (sumiran) you need go no further than the woman who returns from the well with pots on her head; on the way she gossips with village women but always her awareness is fixed on the pots and not a drop of water falls.” Virmani sings, “O beloved, I belong to you, even though I dwell in a foreign land, I go about my daily business, but my heart is always with you.”

A beautiful Mira bhajan takes forward the metaphor, “Walk carefully my friend. What is this beautiful pot made of? How is it decorated? Keep it carefully my friend, because eventually, it’s going to take a knock.” It’s an image for the fragility of the body and our life.

In another song by Mira, Krishna tells Radha he’s afraid to surrender to her love because then he won’t be able to go to war. Virmani says, “A lot of gender violence stems from fear of the other, and men are more afraid of the experience of surrender to the other that threatens them.”