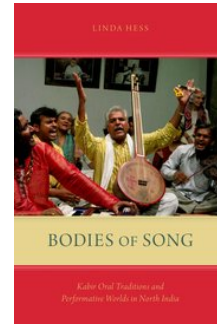
Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India, by Linda Hess



Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015 | xiii+467 pages | ISBN: 978-0-199-37416-8 (hardback) £64.00; ISBN: 978-0-199-37417-5 (softback) ££25.99

Linda Hess's new book, *Bodies of Song*, is beautifully written and important. It marks a culmination of her forty years of research on the songs and verses attributed to Kabir, the famous weaver poet and singer of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century North India. In the book, Hess pays special attention to the contemporary musical performances of Kabir songs by Prahlad Tipanya, a singer from the Malwa region of northeast central India, and to her conversations with him and his family members and with Shabnam Virmani, a film-maker who has made several films about Kabir.

Hess's accounts of her encounter and friendship with Tipanya, Virmani and others in the period from 2002 to 2015 give the book a deeply personal and autobiographical dimension. Her participant-observer role is highlighted by vignettes of her own personal experiences, selections from her field notes, transcriptions of her conversations and interviews, and, above all, her superlative translations of Kabir's songs and verses. These features enliven Hess's text and make it a pleasure to read. They also enhance the authority of her more academic discussions. Here I will first comment on three key aspects of Hess's book and then briefly discuss a few of her own comments on the work on Kabir of others, particularly Purushottam Agrawal, Winand Callewaert and myself. The first of my three comments has to do with translation. Hess is rightly regarded as by far the best translator of Kabir into English. Her translations display so singular a voice that sometimes it is hard to decide if Hess is channeling Kabir or Kabir is channeling Hess. *Bodies of Song* is full of Hess's trademark translations of Kabir songs, especially those of the Malwa tradition sung by Prahlad Tipanya. Both in terms of their sound in English and their closeness to the original sense of the Hindi, these translations are close to perfect.

The translations do, however, raise one intriguing question: Are they *too* perfect? How appropriate is it, in an academic study, to take what are essentially song lyrics, originally meant to be sung, texts with a definite meter and rhyme, and transform them into real English poetry using the very modern

literary medium of free verse, a medium that mostly eliminates any regular meter, does not use rhyme, and often employs a strong visual emphasis on certain words and phrases? To take an inverted example: what would we think about Asok Vajpeyi translating Bob Dylan's lyrics into modern Hindi free verse? The results would surely be excellent poetry, but in what sense would they embody the Bob Dylan originals? How can a translator who is also a poet solve this dilemma? Hess has responded to this comment rightly noting that it is virtually impossible to translate into English using rhyme and a uniform meter and still keep to the sense of the Hindi original. Nonetheless, the gap between the two artistic creations, and their performance, remains a large one.

A second comment concerns the concept of oral tradition. Hess's discussion of the strategies and techniques that Prahlad Tipanya employs in his song performances as well as her chapter on the theory of orality make manifest her deep love affair with live musical performances of Kabir songs and with the oral-performative mode of presentation in general. She defines (211) the oral-performative "as referring to live, body-to-body transmission, where sounds produced by voices and instruments reach ears located in the same physical vicinity." In this way she stresses the difference between the oral-performative and not only reading but also electronic reproduction. She notes (232) "Physical presence and social interaction entail a quality of embodiment very different from what occurs with internet communication. This is not just a marginal point. It is crucial." Hess seems to sense that she may be pushing her argument a little too far when she later asks (241): "Am I romanticizing orality?" She immediately answers with a denial: "No, the point I am making is not about nostalgia or romance." It is hard, however, to avoid the conclusion that she does tend to romanticize oral performance. As she says near the end of the chapter (p. 245): "I make a case for the particularity and preciousness of a tradition that is oral, physical, and social."

I myself certainly enjoy listening to Kabir songs by a good singer, especially when they are songs I already know. If the performance is live, so much the better. But there are also special virtues in reading Kabir, even in translation (though few translations approach Hess's excellence). Reading makes it possible to take one's time in understanding the texts and pondering their meanings. Sung words, particularly in a language that is not one's own, go by fast and are often lost in the sounds of the instruments. Memorization offers similar benefits to reading, but it is much more work.

My third comment concerns Linda's in-depth discussion of the sometimes tense relation between spirituality and politics in the Kabir songs and in the somewhat similar songs popularized during the 1960s movement for African-American civil rights in the United States. We all, I think, have a roughly similar idea about what we mean by politics, but how should we define spirituality? Linda says the following: "I use the word 'spirituality' to refer to (1) an inner-directed process of cultivating self-knowledge and alleviating suffering; and (2) an impulse to break free from the narrow bounds of self-centered individuality, to know one's connection to all living beings, to nature, to matter and energy" (357).

One problem with this definition is that, in her enthusiasm for spirituality, Hess seems to be claiming that this "impulse … to know one's connection to all living beings, to nature, to matter and energy" is about *knowing*, rather than about having a particular expansive emotion, an "oceanic feeling" as Freud called it. To suggest that this experience is based on an actual encounter with, or perception of, some sui generis, non-empirically verifiable reality out there in this world or beyond is, for me, once again to go a step or two too far. Spirituality also seems to me to be too vague a concept to be analytically useful. Does it mean more than loosely defined religiosity or religious sentiment separated from any explicit association with any specific religion or sect? More useful would be a discussion of how Kabir conceptualizes his religious experience: as a discovery of a divine person or spirit within one's body, as a divine person or spirit who pervades the universe, as a lover who has left the worshipper in the lurch, as a personal god somewhere out there. All these concepts can be found in Kabir's songs, but some are more important than others and their interplay merits close examination.

A few comments that Hess makes in her chapter on "True Words of Kabir: Adventures in Authenticity" are also worth noting. Here Hess does discuss written texts, especially the older manuscript anthologies containing Kabir songs. Hess describes, without taking clear sides, two basic ways of looking at the question of authenticity. Songs composed in Kabir's name—like many songs attributed to Sur Das and Mirabai—evidently continued to be produced long after Kabir's death. Should we regard all the songs that seem true to Kabir's "spirit" as authentic, no matter who wrote them when, or should we try to winnow out the authentic songs by accepting only those found several of the oldest manuscripts? Both approaches are valid, each in its own way, but each also has its own problems.

Part of Hess's discussion on authenticity is about the strategies used by Winand Callewaert to assemble his *Millennium Kabir* collection of 593 Kabir songs and against the criticisms against Callewaert's method made by Purushottam Agrawal. Agrawal particularly objected to Callewaert's creation of a "star system" in which he assigns one, two or three stars to specific songs based on their appearance in one, two, or three different old manuscript traditions. Hess argues (125) that Agrawal's "accusations against Callewaert are, in my view, excessive." She notes that (128) "Callewaert does not claim to have found the authentic Kabir," but she also admits that Callewaert explicitly says that " 'the songs which occur in most repertoires, in different regions, have a better chance of having been composed by Kabir.' " Reading a bit between the lines, it is hard not to see in this an attempt by Callewaert to create the impossible, an authentic "original" Kabir. Callewaert's rather sarcastic disparagement of the later "inauthentic" songs is also hard to miss.

Agrawal's own strategy for identifying the oldest Kabir is to tentatively accept, as a collection, the songs preserved in the Dadu panthi anthology known as the *Kabir-granthavali*. There are some serious difficulties with this argument as Hess notes. A related problem for any discussion of the relative authenticity of the old Kabir anthologies is what to do with the songs of the *Kabir Bijak*. This collection seems to be an old one and is regarded as the only fully authentic collection by the sadhus of the Kabir Panth. It also comes from the eastern Bhojpuri area where the man Kabir once lived. The stumbling block for accepting its antiquity is that the oldest known manuscript of this collection is dated 1805 CE. For this reason Callewaert did not include the *Bijak* songs in his *Millennium Kabir* collection. He does include a list of *Bijak* songs also found in the other old collections, but this list is in fact quite incomplete. It is also worth noting that the *Bijak* songs (*pad*s), like those of the *Kabir Granthavali* and the *Adi Granth*, have almost no overlap with the apparently more recent Kabir songs (*bhajan*s). This whole question needs further analysis.

Hess's book inevitably contains a few minor factual errors. She wrongly claims (121) that Shyamsundar Das edited "the 1928 *Kabir Granthavali* based on a single Rajasthani manuscript, which he thought was written in 1504." In fact Das used two manuscripts, the second of which had a colophon dated in 1634 CE. Again, Hess claims (352) that a song of the gospel singer Blind Willie Johnson, one that I compared to Kabir songs, says that God is not in the pulpit. In fact Johnson claims that God is not found *only* in the pulpit, but is also found everywhere including "all over the floor." In a remark

about a discussion I wrote about the relation of Advaita Vedanta to Kabir, Hess says (41) that she is "doubtful about his comparison of Kabir's *nirgun* bhakti to Shankara's Advaita Vedanta philosophy." This is taken somewhat out of context. It is less *my* comparison than a comparison sometimes made by modern, educated Kabir panthis. The use of the Brahman concept as an argument for social equality is not only sometimes used by Kabir panthis, it also appears in the words of a few of Shankara's (non-Kabir panthi) opponents in Shankara hagiographies. Hess is certainly correct, however, when she notes that Kabir bases his arguments for human equality mostly on the common flesh of all human bodies and not on their supra-physical identity in Brahman.

To recap, Hess's *Bodies of Song*, should become an instant classic. It is written in an innovative and entertaining way and not only wrestles with serious questions about orality, authenticity, and the interplay of the spiritual and the political, but also offers many beautiful translations of the lyrics of many of Kabir's songs.

David N. Lorenzen
El Colegio de México