



COLLEGE OF MUSIC

University of North Texas
College of Music

Guest Artist Recital | Thursday, April 18, 2024 | 8:00 pm | Recital Hall

Prahlad Singh Tipanya – Lead Vocals, Tambura, Kartāl
Devnarayan Saroliya – Violin, Supporting Vocals
Ajay Tipaniya – Dholak, Supporting Vocals
Dharmendra Tipaniya – Harmonium, Supporting Vocals
Priyal Maheshwari – Manjirā, Supporting Vocals
Dr. Vivek Virani – Bānsurī, Supporting Vocals

The Voice of the Saints

Translations and Academic Explanations by:

Dr. Linda Hess (Emerita, Stanford University)

Dr. Vivek Virani (UNT Ethnomusicology and Music Theory)

In tonight's program, Prahlad Singh Tipanya and his troupe present bhajans (spiritual songs) by mystical poet-saints from North India known as Sants. This body of poetry, preserved in the oral tradition through chanting and singing, is known as Sant-Vānī (literally, the "Voice of the Saints").

Prahlad Tipanya has received particular acclaim for his knowledge and presentations of poetry by the fifteenth-century iconoclastic Sant, Kabir. Kabir's poetry resonates with listeners across social backgrounds as strikingly modern and relevant to our times. Kabir laments the hypocrisy of institutionalized religion and performative piety, seeking instead an inner world of spirituality. He repudiates the authority of priests, theologians, and scholars, advocating instead the pursuit of individual realization of truth. He forces us to confront the artificiality of every form of identity through which we falsely divide the world into a sense of Self and Other.

Format

Prahlad Tipanya has captivated audiences worldwide by rendering the Sant-Vānī in an engaging musical style that draws from folk music traditions of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and surrounding regions. Each pad or poem is presented as a bhajan (song) in strophic form, with four to six verses and a refrain. The final verse, popularly known as chāp (signature), usually contains the name of the poet-saint to whom the poem is attributed. In Tipanya's repertoire, this is most often Kabir or one of the Sants of the esoteric Nath Yogi tradition such as Gorakh Nath or Bhavani Nath.

Before each bhajan, singers in this tradition will sing one or more poetic couplets called sākhī (literally "witness" or "testimony") that relate to the themes of the song in pithy language. The musical format allows singers to memorize and reproduce hundreds or even thousands of poems. The Sant-Vānī repertoire operates as a shared body of spiritual knowledge, continually re-vivified and re-interpreted as it is brought to life anew with every performance.

Before presenting each song, and sometimes between verses of a song, Prahlad Tipanya shares his own interpretation of the verses. His exegesis of this poetry has enabled listeners from many religiously, socially, and culturally diverse audiences to access deep meanings within Sant poetry in ways relevant to their own lives.

Key Concepts

There are several key philosophical concepts that recur in poetry by Kabir and other Sants. A few of them include:

Shabd: This literally means "word" or "sound." It can be used to refer to a song itself, or to the song's deeper message or meaning. Those who find their lives changed by hearing the Voice of the Saints speak of being "struck," "wounded," or even "pierced" by the Word.

Nād: This literally means "sound," and is a core philosophical concept in Sant and Yogic poetry. It is typically described as either anhad (boundless) or anhat (un-played). The boundless, unplayed Sound may refer to the sublime experience or inner truth one receives through meditation, or it may refer to one's own breath, which is frequently the object of meditation. Regardless, this Sound is understood to permeate and connect all life in the universe.

Sūrat: This is our attention or awareness. The Sants continually exhort us to turn this focus away from the distractions, false attainments, and false dualities of material life, and instead to turn it inward.

Anubhav: This means "experience," and is a concept that permeates Sant poetry. For the Sants, truth is not something that can be acquired through reading books or scriptures or listening to religious authorities. Truth must be found for each individual through an inner journey and personal experience.

Guru: The guru, or teacher, holds a central place of importance in the Sant tradition. "Satguru" (True Teacher) is frequently used as a name for the Divine. In Prahlad Tipanya's interpretation, guru need not only refer to people of authority, but to anything that enables one to find truth in their lives – including our own communities, bodies, and life experiences.

Biographies

Prahlad Singh Tipanya is one of the most compelling voices of Indian folk music today. He has been celebrated for his captivating musical presentations of mystical poetry called "Sant-Vani" (literally "the voice of the saints"), with a special focus on the poetry of the fifteenth-century iconoclastic saint-poet, Kabir. Tipanya's performers not only bring this body of oral tradition to new audiences throughout the world, but include inspirational interpretations of the messages this poetry carries for our own time.

Dr. Linda Hess is a scholar of spiritual poetry from North India who recently retired after many years teaching at Stanford University. In the 1970s, Dr. Hess produced the first full-length English translation of *The Bijak*, an anthology of esoteric poetry by Kabir. Her most recent book, *Bodies of Song* (2015), discusses the oral tradition of Kabir poetry kept alive in the Malwa region of North India by Prahlad Singh Tipanya and other singers like him.

Dr. Vivek Virani is a scholar and performer of spiritual music from around the world, with a focus on mystic traditions of South Asia.

Devnarayan Saroliya is a versatile musician. Saroliya has accompanied Prahlad Tipanya for decades as a violinist and supporting singer. Apart from the Malvi Sant tradition, Saroliya is adept in many other genres of North Indian spiritual folk music, ranging from Rajasthani bhajans to Sufi kalām.

Ajay Tipanya is Prahlad Tipanya's son and primary rhythmic accompanist. He has accompanied spiritual singers in a wide variety of folk and fusion genres. Tipanya is also a trustee of the Kabir Smarak educational foundation, and has established a recording studio in Indore to support and elevate the work of folk and regional singers from Madhya Pradesh.

Dharmendra Tipanya is Prahlad Tipanya's nephew and primary harmonium accompanist. He has accompanied Tipanya on multiple U.S. tours.

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COLLEGE OF MUSIC
EXCELLENCE • INTEGRITY • IMAGINATION

Division of Music History, Theory, and Ethnomusicology 2023-2024 Concert & Scholarly Interpretation

The Voice of the Saints

Featuring Prahlad Singh Tipanya and the Kabir Singers



April 18 • 8 P.M. • Recital Hall Music Room 301
FREE ADMISSION

Hear stirring mystic poetry by India's rebel saints, performed by award-winning folk musicians
Live translation by Linda Hess and Vivek Virani



OUR VALUES



Courageous
Integrity



Be Curious



We Care



Better Together



Show Your
Fire



UNT is honored to be hosting the celebrated Indian singer Prahlad Singh Tipanya and his troupe. Although he is originally from a marginalized community from a tiny village in Madhya Pradesh, over the last 40 years Tipanya has spearheaded a revival of the oral tradition of singing poetry by Kabir (fifteenth century) and other mystic poet-saints. These songs contain stirring spiritual and social reformist messages, and are rendered by Tipanya in an engaging musical format that has captivated audiences throughout India and the world. Tipanya is particularly known for his interpretations of the songs that make their messages resonate with modern audiences from all kinds of social, religious, and national backgrounds. Out of over a billion Indian citizens, Tipanya was chosen in 2011 for the prestigious Padma Shri award for preserving the oral tradition of Kabir's poetry and its messages of social and religious harmony.

Six hundred seventy-fourth program of the 2023–2024 season
Photography and videography are prohibited