

Mirabai in a group of bhaktas

# Poison to Nectar

## The Life and Work of Mirabai

by Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita

*Nam Rahega kam son  
Suno sayane loye  
Mira sut jayo nahin  
Shishya na mudo koye*

“One’s name will live on through one’s work, consider this if you are wise; Mira did not give birth to a son nor did she have any disciples.”  
(popular saying)

THE culture of north India values women mainly as mothers of sons. Yet it honours and reveres Mira, a childless

woman (widowed or separated) who is identified in the popular imagination as having rebelled against husband and in-laws. In the country as a whole, she is the best known of all women poets. Versions of her songs are sung in Gujarati, Hindi and its dialects, Punjabi, Bhojpuri, Bengali, Oriya. Some are incorporated into the *Guru Granth Saheb*. Her songs have been so much a part of living oral traditions that it is not possible to establish definitively the authenticity of all the songs attributed to her. Many of the more popular songs appear in different forms.<sup>1</sup> Mira’s work is also part of written literary tradition. She

is placed amongst the half dozen greatest *bhakta* poets in what has today come to be called Hindi.

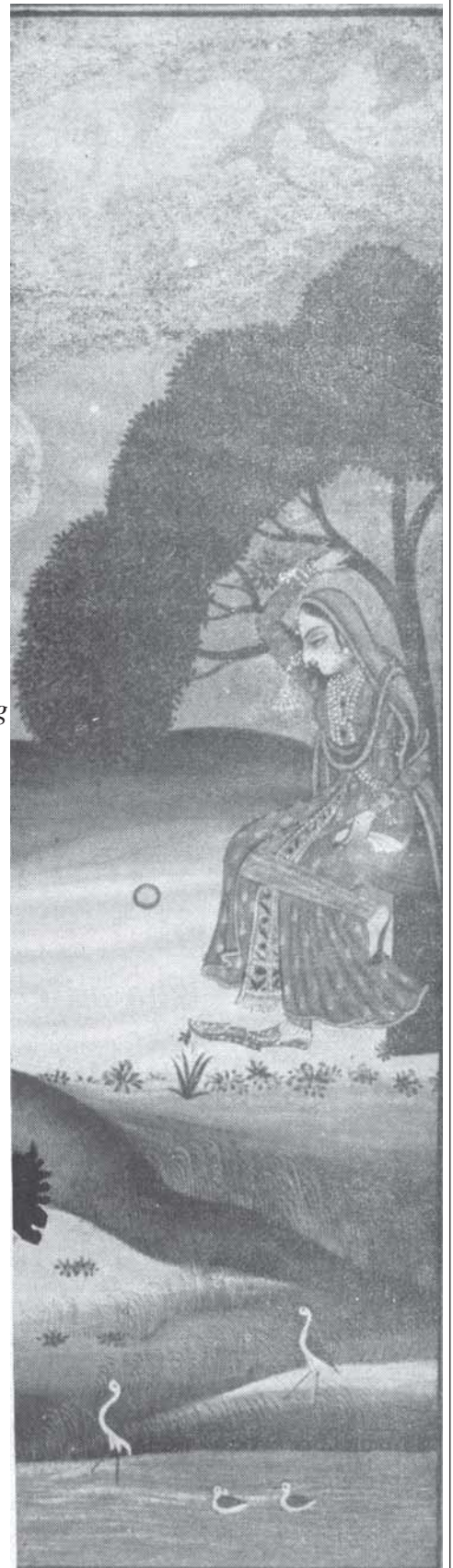
The figure of Mira, constructed in popular imagination through legend and the supporting interpretation of her songs, has accumulated many meanings over time. She is seen as a saint, as a mystic, as a fervent devotee of Krishna, as an anguished *virahini*, as one who gave up the world for god, and also as a rebel. Many of the *bhakta* poets are perceived as rebels against injustice of various kinds perpetrated by the established order, but Mira is perhaps the only one in the Hindi

*I saw the dark clouds and I wept,  
 Shyam, I saw the dark clouds and  
 wept  
 The black clouds and the yellow  
 gathered, and they rained for a  
 very long time.  
 Wherever I looked, there was water;  
 the thirsty earth was green.  
 My lover lives in a foreign country,  
 I've gotten drenched in my door-  
 way standing and waiting for him.  
 Mira's Lord Hari is the imperishable  
 one; he proved his love for me.  
 (82, trans, Zide and Pande)*

*Friend, the arrow of his glance struck  
 my eyes;  
 Its point pierced my heart (and) his  
 sweet image entered my soul.  
 For a long time I have been staying  
 (here) watching the road, standing  
 at my house.  
 My life clings to (my) dark beloved,  
 (he is) a life-giving herb.  
 Mira says I am sold into the hands of  
 Giridhar, but people say I am  
 loose.*

*Mira is dyed Hari's\* colour, other  
 colours did not take. (14, trans, Zide and Pandey)  
 My bangles are the tilak and rosary,  
 chastity and austerity my ornaments  
 I don't want other ornaments. This is  
 The wisdom of my guru  
 Some may blame me, some may  
 praise me; (but) I will sing the  
 praise of Govind.  
 The path that the saintly have taken,  
 I will take.  
 I neither steal nor harm anyone; what  
 can anyone do to me?  
 having ridden an elephant, how can  
 I ride a donkey? Such a thing  
 can't be.  
 (25, trans. Zide and Pandey)*

*\*a play on the word which means "Vishnu" and also  
 "green"*



region whose rebellion is against injustice within the family and kinship group, injustice done her because she was a woman. This dimension is present in the life, legends and compositions of some women *bhakta* poets in other languages, but is perhaps most clearly and forcefully articulated by Mirabai.

Part of the forcefulness emanates from the fact that Mira belonged to the Rajput aristocracy of Rajasthan. Rajputs traditionally prided themselves on the valour of their men and the fiercely guarded sexual virtue of their women- both essential components of the *izzat* or honour held so dear in their martial traditions. Their norms of segregation, seclusion of women, sanctions against remarriage and widow marriage, were all linked to control and valorization of women's sexual virtue. The practice by this group of *sati* and *of jauhar* (collective *sati* performed by Rajput women when the defeat and death of the men at the hands of enemy forces seemed inevitable) are glorified in Rajput tradition as an expression of the courage of their women- a courage thus articulated primarily in defence of their sexual virtue, the supposed repository of community honour.

Some groups of Rajputs were prominent amongst the groups that practised female infanticide in the nineteenth century, and boasted that they never had to bow their heads before a son-in-law and his family. Being the dominant community in Rajasthan, Rajput norms strongly influenced Rajasthani culture as a whole. Even today, the effects of the devaluation of women's lives are evident in the low sex ratio (proportion of women to men), low literacy, education and employment rates for women, and greater seclusion and segregation in most parts of Rajasthan as compared to many other parts of the country.

It is in this context that Mira's rebellion acquires its dramatic quality. She stands out as a lone and extraordinary figure, the exception that proves the rule. She does not seem to emerge from any known tradition of women's rebellion of this or of

any other kind in her community, nor, after her, did any such tradition develop. Rajasthani Rajputs and Rajasthan in general did not, even in the nineteenth century, throw up a social reform movement around women's issues, even though at this time such movements emerged in many other communities and regions.

How then, do we explain, or rather, understand, a Mira? What does her emergence, her cultural survival and her subsequent popularity signify? Let us look at the little that is known and the more that is believed concerning her life.

### Life and Legend

The dates of Mira's lifespan are uncertain and much disputed. According to one account to which we will generally adhere she was born c. 1498 and died c. 1546. She is believed to have been the daughter of Ratnasingh of the Medtiya Rathor clan, and his wife Vir Kunwari. Mira's paternal great grandfather, Jodhaji, was the founder of Jodhpur. Her paternal grandfather, Dudaji, had conquered Medta city and 360 villages around it. He gave Mira's father, Ratnasingh, 12 villages of which the central village was Kudki. Mira was born in the small fort at Kudki.

Tradition has it that as a young child, Mira pestered her mother to tell her the meaning of "bridegroom." Her mother replied that every girl has a bridegroom. Mira then demanded to know who her bridegroom was. To escape her persistent questioning, Vir Kunwari pointed to an image of Krishna, saying: "There's your bridegroom", and, ever after, Mira considered herself wedded to Krishna. The significant point is that Mira's natal family were Vaishnavs. Her grandfather, Dudaji, his son Biramdev, (her uncle), and grandson Jaimal (her cousin) are all mentioned as eminent Vaishnav *bhaktas* in *Bhaktamal*, a versified anthology of the lives of *bhaktas*, composed by Nabhadasi, a *bhakta* of the low caste Dom community, who lived in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. Like Andal, Mira thus inherits Vaishnav *bhakti* as part of a family

legacy.

She was married into the royal family of Sisodia Rajputs of Mewar. The identity of her husband is not established beyond dispute. Traditionally, she was believed to have been the wife of Maharana Kumbh, but most scholars now agree that her husband was Bhojraj, eldest son of the famed warrior, Rana Sanga. Some interpret the marriage as part of a political alliance between the Ranas of Mewar and the Rathors of Jodhpur, against the royal family of Marwar.

According to some accounts, Mira was accompanied from her natal to her marital home by her maidservant and companion in *bhakti*, Lalita, who remained with her throughout her life, acted as her amanuensis, and died with her. Dhruvdas, in his versified account of Mira's life, says that Mira said: "I will take Lalita with me, (wherever I go), I have great love for her."<sup>4</sup>

The legend continues that when she went to her marital home, Mira was required, as a new daughter-in-law, to worship her in-laws' family deity- the goddess (*devi*). The Sisodias were Shaktas, worshippers of Shakti. In the *Bhaktamal Vartik*, 1712, his versified commentary on the *Bhaktamal*, Priyadas narrates:

*When she reached the house, she touched her mother-in-law's feet... The mother-in-law arranged a puja of the goddess. The groom worshipped first, and then the bride was to worship. She said: 'How can one who has been sold into Giridhar's hands Worship any other? My aspirations are set on him alone.'*

The narrative goes on with Mira being told: "Worship her whose worship will enhance your *suhag*", that is, lengthen your husband's life, but still she refuses. The mother-in-law then tells Mira's husband that "This bride is of no use. ... get rid of her, she has insulted me. Why wait for further evidence?" and "Rana was angry when he heard this."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Mira's *bhakti* first became

conflict ridden in the context of her resistance to her husband's family's attempt to mould her, as the new daughter-in-law, according to their requirements. One of Mira's songs is highly suggestive of her reaction to this attempt by her in-laws:

*Today I am in the company of  
good people, Rana, how fortunate I am.  
Those who mingle with good people  
are dyed four times over  
Do not associate with the Shaktas-  
your devotion will be disturbed.  
Sixty eight holy places, crores of  
Kashis and Gangas are at the feet sants.  
Whoever slanders them will go to  
hell; will become blind and crippled.  
Mira's god is the lifter of mountains;  
I am clad in the dust of the sants'  
feet.*

Modern Hindi scholars have been at great pains to argue that Mira "lived happily with her husband" until his death, and then turned to intense Krishna *bhakti* as a sort of compensation: "As soon as she was separated from her *patidev* (husband as god) she suddenly shattered all worldly ties, averted her attention from all else, and became even more immersed in her chosen deity."<sup>6</sup> Vishwanath Tripathi indignantly repudiates the idea that her rebellion may have been directed against her husband, saying: "She was not a light minded or psychologically abnormal woman."<sup>7</sup> Chaturvedi too condemns the traditional idea of Mira as a rebel against her husband: "... The blot of being a rebel against her husband has been [wrongly] placed on her pure character."<sup>8</sup>

However, accepted tradition is at variance with this view. Nagaridas, a *bhakta* of the Vallabh Sampradaya' who also happened to belong to the same Rathor clan as did Mira in his verses composed c.1743, says that Mira was offered poison because she preferred the company of other devotees to physical contact with her husband. Legend has it that Mira remained a virgin after her marriage. Considering herself wedded to Krishna, she refused to consummate the

marriage. In two of her songs she describes herself as virgin through life after life" (Nos. 51, 77). This, however, could be meant as a metaphorical rather than a literal description.

Traditionally, the "Rana" addressed in Mira's songs has been interpreted as her husband. Later *bhaktas* who narrated her life in their versified anthologies of *bhaktas'* lives established this interpretation and referred to her husband as "Rana." Recent scholarship, however, tends to identify the "Rana" addressed in her songs with her husband's brother Vikramjit Singh who succeeded to the title of "Maharana" after the death of Mira's father-in-law and husband. By this account, the conflict escalated only after Mira became a widow.

In earlier accounts Mira is nowhere referred to as a widow, but is often described as a married woman refusing the pleasures and restrictions of married life. Nor in her songs does she ever refer to herself as a widow. She describes herself as refusing silks and jewels, of which a widow would have been deprived.

Whatever the historical facts may be, it is significant that the Rana addressed in Mira's songs is not explicitly identified by her in terms of the familial relation he bears to her, nor is he even named. He is referred to only by his title as a chieftain. His most important function in her songs is that of a figure of authority. His power extends over the family as well as the community and the larger society. The women described as hostile to her are identified in familial terms (mother-in-law, sister-in-law), but the hostile male figure is clearly more powerful and dangerous. His displeasure has more fearful consequences- he attempts to kill her and also persecutes the other devotees. The larger significance with which the Rana is invested by the lack of explicit identification leaves his figure open to more diverse interpretation. This in part explains how this figure lends itself to the traditional interpretation as her husband.

The major source of conflict, as it emerges in Mira's songs, and in legends, is her insistence on active association with

the community of *bhaktas*. A secluded devotion to Krishna within the women's quarters is unlikely to have provoked such animosity from the family (although, as Nilima Singh puts it: "A married woman who did not consider her husband god, but considered god her husband must have startled them"!)." The conflict of norms became irreconcilable because of Mira's spending time with like-minded people not of her family, and actually going so far as to dance and sing in gatherings of devotees and in public places like temple- a highly unsuitable practice for a Rajput princess, and one that few middle or upper class families would consider respectable even today.

It must also be remembered that the community of *bhaktas* was by no means entirely drawn from the upper castes. In fact, one important feature of *bhakti* was its openness to people from all groups and its emphasis on the equality of all devotees before god, the primacy of devotion and love over booklearning, and a consequent leaning in favour of the poor and lowly whose sincere devotion is viewed as more acceptable to god than the ritualistic religious observances of the learned.

Some idea of the social composition of the *bhakta* community can be gleaned from Vaishnav chronicles like *Chourasi Vaishnavon ki Varta* and *Do Sau Vaishnavan ki Varta* (The accounts of 84 Vaishnavs, and The accounts of 200 Vaishnavs). Many of the accounts identify *bhaktas* who were from low, Shudra and untouchable castes, Muslims, nomads and disreputable, even criminal groups:

"The story of Yadendra Das the potter";  
"The story of Patho the Gujari";  
"The story of Ali Khan, the Pathan";  
"The story of a Chuhra";

\*or, I behave differently/uniquely;  
(*mein chalungi chaal anuthi*) the word *chaal* means both to walk and mode of conduct as in *chaal chalu*.

\*\*Literally, the kitchen fire,

*Mine is the dark one, who dwells in  
 Braj.  
 Friends, marriages of this world are  
 false, they are wiped out of  
 existence.  
 Wed my indestructible one, whom the  
 serpent, death, cannot devour.  
 My beloved dwells in the heart, I've  
 seen the source of all bliss.  
 Mira's god, indestructible joygiver,  
 your slavegirl seeks your feet.*  
 (194)

*I am dyed in the dark one's hue, Rana,  
 I am dyed in the dark one's hue  
 Beating the drum to keep time, I  
 danced before the sadhus.  
 People thought me mad with love.  
 crazed for love of the dark one.  
 Rana sent me a cup of poison, I  
 swallowed it without a thought.  
 Mira's god, the lifter of mountains,  
 remains true life after life.*  
 (37)

*If Sisodiya is angry, what will he do  
 to me?  
 I will sing the virtues of Govind,  
 friends.  
 If Rana is angry, he will stay in his  
 own country (and not harm me).  
 If Hari is angry, I will wither, friend.  
 I don't care for worldly position;  
 Fearless, I will beat the drum, friend.  
 I will sound Shayam's name on the  
 castanets  
 I will cross the ocean of life, friend.  
 Strong Giridhar is Mira's refuge;  
 I will cling to his lotus feet, friend.*  
 (35, trans, Zide and Pandey)

*Mine is the lifter of mountains, the  
 cowherd, and none other.  
 O sadhus! there is no other -- I have  
 seen the whole world.  
 I left brothers, I left kindred, I left  
 all I had.  
 Sitting near the sadhus, I lost worldly  
 shame.  
 I looked at the devotees and I was one  
 with them; I looked at the world  
 and wept.  
 With tears I watered love's creeper  
 and it took root.  
 I churned the milk, drew out the ghee  
 and threw away the whey.  
 Rana sent a cup of poison; I drank  
 it and stayed ecstatic.  
 Mira's attachment is strong -- what  
 was to happen has happened*  
 (18)



Early nineteenth century painting of Mira

“The story of a Dokri”;  
 “The story of Kalavat, the washerman”;  
 “The story of a prostitute”;  
 “The story of a thief who was a Vaishnav”;  
 “The story of a weaver’s daughter”;  
 “The story of a Pathan’s daughter”;  
 “The story of a prostitute’s daughter”;  
 “The story of an ironsmith”;  
 “The story of Raskhan Pathan”;  
 “A Chuhra who got the better of Pandits.”

For a married woman to establish associations with people outside her family and mingle with them on her own is even today generally frowned upon. This is so even when her associates are of her own caste and class status. Mira’s song quoted above suggests that the *bhaktas* were criticised by many in contemporary society. Many of their practices were certainly unorthodox. Numerous legends relating to different *bhaktias* revolve around their conflicts with established religious authority and practice. Many relate to the breaking down of caste taboos. For example, in one legend, Kabir got into trouble with Pandits because he chose as an act of piety to feed poor Shudras instead of Brahmans.

That hostility to the *bhaktas* took active forms too, apart from slander, is indicated in the last line of a Mira song which also suggests, through its pointed paradoxes, that those who appear great and good may be the opposite while those who appear base may be more worthy:

*Strange are the ways of fate.  
 The deer has large eyes to see yet  
 strays [as if lost] from forest to forest.  
 The crane\* is shining white, the  
 cuckoo black in hue,  
 River water flows pure,  
 the sea turns it salt\*\*  
 Fools are enthroned as kings,  
 the learned wander door to door.*



*O Mira’s god, lifter of mountains!  
 The Rana persecutes the bhaktas.* (190)

\* In folklore, an image of hypocrisy particularly religious hypocrisy, as in *bagula bhagat*, because it stands still, pretends to be lost in meditation, and then snaps up unwary fish which approach it.

\*\* The smaller (rivers) are purer and more useful than the large and mighty (the sea), an idea found also in Kabir (*Bada hua to kya hua ...*)

In popular perception, too, Mira’s caste status features as a point of conflict between her and her in-laws. In a folksong recorded by Padmavati Shabnam, Mira and her sister-in-law, Udo, are depicted as holding a dialogue. Udo says:

*Sister-in-law, I’ve tried my best to  
 dissuade you, but failed; do listen  
 to me.  
 The Rana is angry- do not go  
 amongst strange\* sadhus.  
 It is a blot on the family, sister-in-law,  
 we are being severely criticised.  
 Wandering from forest to forest with  
 sadhus, you have lost your honour.  
 You have been born in a great house  
 yet you dance, clapping your hands..  
 For you to sit amongst the high and  
 the low [making no distinction],  
 sister-in-law, when you are of so  
 superior a caste,  
 And when you have a husband like the  
 Rana [is not right]<sup>10</sup>*

\* The word used is *par*, which carries the connotation of a strange man, *paraya purush* with whom it is improper for a woman to associate.

According to tradition, Mira chose Ravidas, also known as Rohidas or Raidas, the Chamar *bhakta*, as her guru. In a song attributed to her, she says:

*...I have found a guru in Raidas, he  
 has given me the pill of knowledge,*

*...I lost the honour of the royal  
 family, I went astray\* with the  
 sadhus,  
 I constantly rise up, go to god’s  
 temple, and dance, snapping my  
 fingers,  
 I don’t follow the norms as an oldest*

*daughter-in-law, I have thrown away  
 the veil,  
 I have taken refuge with the great  
 guru, and snapped my fingers at the  
 consequences.<sup>11</sup>*

\*The word used is *bhatki* — the same word used in song 9: “People say I have gone astray.”

The first circle of opposition that Mira had to break through was that of the immediate family. This opposition took the form of restricting her movements by locking her in:

*O friend\*, I cannot live without the  
 delight giver  
 Mother-in-law fight, my sister-in-law  
 teases,  
 The Rana remains angry.  
 They have a watchman sitting at the  
 door, and a lock fastened on it.  
 Why should I give up my first love,  
 the love of my former life?  
 Mira’s god is the lifter of mountains  
 None else pleases me.* (42)

\* Whenever the word “friend” is used in translation, the original word is *Sakhi*, *Sajni*, *Ali* or *Mai*, all terms for a woman friend.

Paradoxically, Mira resists this opposition and goes her own way with the aristocratic self assertion and valour supposed to be characteristic of Rajputs, even while she is flouting community norms, Nabhadras in the *Bhaktamal* noted this quality when he described her as “independent and completely fearless.”

The first person subject, coupled with

O heart, touch the feet of Hari  
The lovely, cool and lotus-soft feet  
that take away the flames of the  
world.

Prahlad touched these feet, and took  
on the rank of Indra.

The feet which made Dhruva steady  
the feet that are the help of the  
helpless;

The feet that encompassed the universe,  
and filled the earth from  
top to bottom with splendor;

The feet that mastered (the serpent)  
Kalia, and played with the milk-  
maids;

The feet that held up (mount)  
Govardhan, and took away Indira's  
pride.

Mira says I am the slave of Giridhar's  
he is a ship to cross the limitless  
sea (of life).

(I, trans. Zide and Pandey)

Friends, I am completely dyed this  
(i.e. Krishna's) colour.

I drank the cup of immortal bliss,  
and became drunk.

My inebriation never goes away,  
however many millions (lit. crores)  
of ways I try (to get rid of it).

Rana sent me a basket with a snake  
in it, and Mira (lit. the girl of  
Merta) put it around her neck.

Smiling, Mira hugged it as if it  
were a string a new pearls.

Rana took a cup of poison, "Find  
Mira," (he said), "and give it to  
her."

She drank it like charanamrita,  
singing the praises of Govinda.

I drank the cup of his names; nothing  
else pleases me (now).

Mira says that her Lord is Giridhar  
Nagar; all (other or others')  
impermanant colours fade.

(40, trans. Zide and Pandey)

Love — do not name it, O innocent  
one.

Strange is the path of love — set foot



**“Love — like the deer hearing the horn — come forth, give up your life.”**

there, your body wastes away.  
If you desire to love, be ready to give  
up your head.\*

Love — as the moth loves the lamp —  
revolve round it, surrender your  
body.

Love — like the deer hearing the horn  
— come forth, give up your life.

Love — as the chakor loves the moon  
— consume fiery coals.\*\*

Love — as the fish loves the water  
— die rather than be parted.

Love — as the bee loves the lotus

— die enclosed within it.  
Mira says, surrender your being  
at Giridhar's lotus feet.

(191)

\*lit. make of your head a seat, inter-  
preted by scholars as “behead yourself  
and make your head your seat”, do  
what is impossible.

\*\* The partidge who in legend is so  
enraptured by the moon that it eats fiery  
coals, mistaking them for fragments of  
the moon.

active verbs, is strongly in evidence in her songs. Her name occurs not only in the customary last line signature, but often as a statement of what she is doing, for example, in a first line: "Ecstatic, Mira sings god's praise." (41) Phrases like "I will", "I will not", "I do" "I am", "I have" and their variants are scattered through her songs. She repeatedly emphasises her disregard for public opinion, that great deterrent to unorthodox actions, especially for women, even today:

*Rana, to me your slander is sweet.  
Some praise me, some blame me. I  
go the other way.\**

*On the narrow path, I found god's  
people. What should I turn back  
for?*

*I'm learning wisdom among the wise,  
and the wicked look at me with  
malice.*

*Mira's Lord is Giridhar Nagar.*

*Let the wicked burn in a furnace. \* \*  
(33, trans. Zide and Pandey)<sup>12</sup>*

She, at times, expresses a pained surprise at the hostility of the Rana:

*Rana, why are you my enemy?*

*You seem the karil\* among trees to  
me.*

*I left your palace, and your roof;  
I left your city.*

*I stopped putting on kajal and beauty  
spots, and put on sash and  
shawl\*\**

*Mira's Lord is Giridhar Nagar.*

*He turned the poison to nectar.  
(34, trans. Zide and Pandey)*

\* a thorny tree of the acacia family, associated with graveyards.

\*\*lit., saffron shawl, i.e., ascetic robes.



Slander against a woman's moral character is a powerful weapon often used to intimidate women into accepting restrictions on their movements and associations. In Rajput culture, with its emphasis on women's sexual virtue, this weapon was especially potent. Mira renders it impotent in the only effective way- by declaring her refusal to be ruled by this norm: "I have given up the norm of family honour, what can anyone do to me?"<sup>13</sup> By stepping out of family and womanly *maryada* (which means both "limit" like a *lakshmanrekha*, and "honour") Mira disarms her detractors- the poison of slander fails to work.

The hostility she faces then takes sterner forms. The Rana's hostility appears to have taken the form of an attempt to kill Mira. The incident of his sending her a cup of poison, which Krishna turned to nectar when she drank it, is repeatedly referred to in her songs. It acquires the potency of a major symbol of her faith in her god, her triumph over her detractors, and the transmutation of her pain into joy. In one of her most famous songs, her abandon is conveyed in her dancing and her laughing:

*Mira danced with ankle-bells on  
her feet.*

*People said Mira was mad; my  
mother-in-law said I ruined the  
family reputation.*

*Rana sent me a cup of poison and  
Mira drank it laughing.*

*I dedicated my body and soul at the  
feet of Hari.*

*I am thirsty for the nectar of the  
sight of him.*

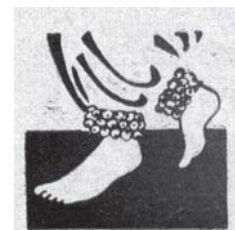
*Mira's lord is Giridhar Nagar; I will  
come for refuge to him.*

(36, trans. Zide and Pandey)

In other songs, she refers to further events which seem to either describe or symbolise attempts to kill or torture her. The Rana sent her a serpent which turned into an image of god when she opened the basket in which it was kept; in another version, she wore the snake as a necklace

and it did not harm her; he sent her a bed of thorns which changed into a bed of flowers when she lay on it. Some scholars interpret these incidents as evidence of Mira's having supporters in the palace, who substituted harmless objects for the harmful ones.

At some point, Mira left the palace and the city, and, according to tradition, returned to her natal home at Medta. After she left, Bahadurshah attacked and conquered Chittor in 1534 and about 13,000 women are said to have committed *jauhar*. One popular belief is that this was a visitation of divine wrath on the ruling family of Chittor for their maltreatment of Mira. A few years later, Vikramjit Singh



regained control over Chittor.

The rulers of Medta too were beleaguered, and, under attack from Maldev of Jodhpur, frequently sought refuge at Ajmer, Ranthambhor and Malwa.

Mira's songs suggest that her natal family, although Vaishnavs, did not approve of her way of expressing her devotion:

"I broke [bonds with] mother, father and family, like a straw." (119)

And, again:

*Whatever they say, my mind is fixed.  
Like gold added to good fortune  
is my love for the mind delighting  
one.*

*The mind, sleeping through many  
births,*

*Woke at the guru's word.*

*Mother, father, family, clan, broke  
like a thread.*

*Mira's god is the lifter of mountains;  
fortunate am I.<sup>14</sup>*

Her having taken to a wanderer's life rather than settling at Medta suggests that, for some reason, she preferred the



former: "I will stay neither in my parental home nor in my mother-in-law's home."<sup>15</sup>

Having dealt with family opposition by leaving the protection of the home, Mira still had to deal with often disapproving opinions in the wider society. She frequently refers to what "people" and "people of the world" say about her, but does not more closely specify who these people are: "The people of the world speak bitter words, and laugh at me."<sup>(45)</sup>

But, even in her lifetime, she received praise as well as blame. In more than one song, she repeats the phrase "some praise me, some blame me." And, more strongly:

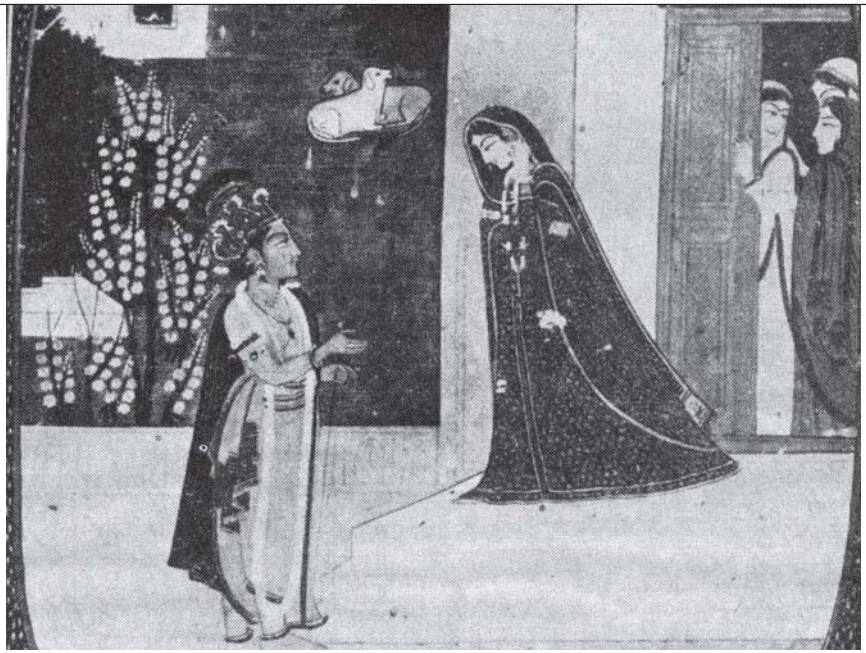
*Because of you, beautiful dark one,  
all the people laugh.  
Some say Mira is mad, some say  
she is a destroyer of family,  
Some say she has lit a lamp and is  
immersed in the beloved's name.<sup>16</sup>*

In general, her attitude to those she terms "people of the world" is one of lofty disregard. In one song, she criticises their priorities and distinguishes her own aspirations from theirs:

*People of this world die of shame  
[to be seen] invoking Ram's name  
Going to Hart's temple, their feet  
start aching  
But they roam around the whole  
village.  
They will run to watch a quarrel,  
abandoning their work at home.  
They will sit all day to watch jesters,  
dancers, a harlot's dance.  
Mira's god, lifter of mountains, fix  
my heart's desire on your lotus  
feet.*

(157)

As distinguished from the people of the world, Mira opts for the society of other *bhaktas*. In song after song, she describes herself as fortunate to have found the company of other devotees, privileged to sit with them, join in common devotion and in gathering of wisdom. This community and its supporters in the wider society would seem to have provided her an alternative way of life.



She refers in some songs to symbols of poverty such as tasteless vegetables and ragged clothing which she prefers to the luxuries of the life she has given up. The world she has found is posed as the polar opposite of the world where the Rana rules:

*I don't like your strange world,  
Rana,  
A world where there are no holy men,  
and all the people are trash.  
I have given up ornaments, given up  
braiding my hair.  
I have given up putting on kajal  
(collyrium), and putting my hair  
up.  
Mira's Lord is Giridhar Nagar; I  
have found a perfect bridegroom.  
(32, trans. Zide and Pandey)*

The pleasures she has found in her new world are imaged as true wealth, as against the false wealth of the community she has left:

*I am connected with the great house\*  
the merit of my former life has  
borne fruit.  
I have no use for a lake; why go to*

*a pond?*

*I have no use for (the) Ganga and  
(the) Jamna, I will go to the sea.  
I have no use for associates. I will go  
(straight) to the chief.  
I have no use for courtiers. I will go  
to the court.  
I have no use for tin and glass; I will  
(like red-hot iron) withstand (the  
hammer blows).  
I have no use for gold and silver; I  
am a dealer in diamonds.  
My fortune has awakened, the ocean  
(the storehouse of jewels) is near.  
Who would turn down a cup of nectar,  
to drink bitter water?  
I am acquainted with pious men, I go  
away from the wicked.  
Mira's Lord is Giridhar Nagar; he  
will fulfil my desires.*

(24, trans. Zide and Pandey)

\*More often interpreted as "the big house is locked" (against me).

According to legend, Mira travelled widely, visiting many temples sacred to Krishna, including the shrine at Dakaur (from where one set of handwritten manuscripts of her songs has been recovered), Vrindavan, and finally, Dwarka. According to legend, Akbar and Tansen travelled to Dwarka to pay their respects

to her, and she and Tansen sang one of her *bhajans* together.

In one song, the temple (Giridhar's house) becomes the centre of her existence, and her survival needs are looked after in the course of this devoted existence:

*I go to Giridhar's house.*

*Giridhar is my real lover; I see his beauty and am allured.*

*When night falls I go; and when day breaks I come back.*

*Night and day I play with him; I please him in every way.*

[line omitted from translation: *What he clothes me in, I wear; what he gives I*



*eat]*

*He is my old lover, I can't be without him for a moment.*

*Where he wants me to sit, I sit; if he sells me, I will be sold.*

*Mira's Lord is Giridhar Nagar; I make myself an offering to him again and again.*

(20, trans. Zide and Pandey)

According to legend, Mira had to encounter different kinds of antagonism from amongst *bhaktas* too, but in each case she is supposed to have deftly handled the situation and emerged triumphant. Priyadas in the *Bhaktamal Vartik*, 1712, narrates how a *sadhu* demanded that Mira sleep with him, saying he had received instructions to this effect from Krishna. Mira is depicted as dealing

with the situation by making it public instead of shrinking in silent embarrassment or humiliation:

*Spreading a bed in the midst of the sant samaj, she said,*

*'Why hesitate now, fearlessly immerse yourself in enjoyment.'*

The *sadhu* then turned white and fell at her feet, asking her to guide him on the path of devotion.<sup>17</sup> This legend links up with an important aspect of women *bhaktas'* lives. To be a *bhakta* was, in a sense, to be outside conventional norms of behaviour. But a woman *bhakta* had to also deal with certain powerful norms specific to women's behaviour. Those women *bhaktas*, for example, who were travelling on their own had to deal with the possibility of sexual harassment. Some of them dealt with it in an openly confrontational way. Lal Ded and Mahadeviakka, by discarding clothing, did what some groups of male *sadhus* do even today. It is noteworthy that both of them were Shiv *bhaktas*. The practice of wandering naked had been adopted by some Shiv *bhaktas* who were known as *avadutas*. But because they were women, their action would not only strike observers with awe but also indicate that they had nothing to be ashamed of, to fear or to lose, with regard to the body. Mira's spreading a bed in public is a similar way of striking awe into and silencing the potential seducer — the normative pattern is reversed when not she, but he, is shamed and embarrassed.

According to another legend, recounted in *Chaurasi Vaishnavan ki Varta*, the Vallabhachari Sampraday, a powerful sect, wished to enrol her as a member. While she was cordial to them, she refused to join them. This angered them and they refused to accept her donations or her hospitality. Even when her own priest, Ramdas, joined the Vallabhacharis, Mira refused to join, whereupon he is said to have abused her, calling her a whore, and left her house,

never to return.

Another well known legend (also found in Priyadas' narrative) says that Mira went to meet Chaitanya's disciple, Jiv Goswami, at Vrindavan, but he sent a message, saying he could not receive her, as he had resolved never to look on a woman's face — implying that looking on a woman might lure him from the path of devotion to god. Mira replied that she had thought there was only one man in Vrindavan, namely, Krishna, and was surprised to find another man there — implying that the gender difference between mortals is irrelevant in *bhakti*, wherein all souls are in the position of the female in relation to god. Chastened by this rebuke, Goswami came out and respectfully escorted her in.

As this legend suggests, *bhakti* provided a creative framework, wherein conventional notions of gendered behaviour tended to be subverted. Mira was able to find a respected place among the *bhaktas* because of this tendency to subvert many value systems. Women, like the lower castes and other despised groups, were able to find in *bhakti* more space than was available to them in ritualistic religion. Even in the more restrictive culture of north India, the presence of a number of women *bhaktas* is recorded in Vaishnav chronicles. *Bhaktamal*, for instance, gives a list of women *bhaktas'* names, in the Hindi region:

*Sita, Jhali, Sumati, Shobha, Prabhuta Uma, Bhatiyani, Ganga, Gauri, Kunwari, Ubitha, Gopali, Ganeshde Rani, Kala, Lakha, Kritgarho, Manmati, Shuchi, Satibhama, Yamuna, Koli, Rama, Mriga, Deva De Bhaktin Vishrama, Jugjeva, Kiki, Kamla, Devaki, Heera, Haricheri...*"<sup>18</sup>

More is known about some other women *bhaktas* like Sundar Kunwaribai, (born 1734) who also suffered much hostility in both her natal and marital

homes; her brother the *bhakta* Nagaridas had a disciple Banithaniji (died 1765). Some verses by both women are extant; Banithaniji's are clearly influenced by Mira. Gangabai (bo 1571) who is said to have lived for 198 years, and was a follower of Vallabh Sampraday, also wrote some verses.<sup>19</sup>

The subverting of many conventional values by *bhaktas* could be extended to include unconventional behaviour by women- not only such activity as singing and dancing in temples, which was central to Mira's expression of devotion, but also such actions as leaving one's husband. *Bhaktamal* narrates how Narsi Mehta, the famous Gujan *bhakta*, had two daughters — Kunwarsena who left her husband and returned to her father's home, and Ratansena, who did not marry. These two, along with two low caste women singers who had become Narsi's disciples, used to sing and dance before god. Narsi's uncle, the Brahman, Salang, was minister at the court of the king of Junagadh. He complained to the king of Narsi's improper behaviour, and the king summoned Narsi and the court. Absorbed in devotion, Narsi and the four women came dancing and singing into the court assembly. The assembly was impressed, but the king said: "What kind of behaviour is this? Why do you keep these young women with you?" Narsi answered: "You have read many books but your brains are dust covered, you are far from the fragrance of devotion. Did not Shukdev praise the women of Mathura who left their husbands?"<sup>20</sup> This kind of daring interpretation of religious symbolism (the *gopis'* love for Krishna being interpreted as a model of the acceptability of the separated woman) to encompass and validate the experience of the marginalised in a way that put the religious orthodoxy on the defensive was typical of the *bhaktas'* style of functioning.

It is noteworthy that the *bhaktas*, though they were criticised and rebuked by the priestly authorities, were not persecuted as heretics, cut off and outcasted. A dialogue and creative tension persists between the opposed opinions, with *bhakti* ultimately winning

acknowledgment for its viewpoint and becoming part of mainstream religious ideology and practice. This fact is crucial to the survival of Mira. Even in the legends of the *bhaktas'* lives, the dialogue never breaks down. The Brahmans do not refuse to dispute or debate. The very fact, for instance, that they are offended by Kabir's feeding Shudras instead of them suggests that far from despising him utterly they wish for his recognition. This tension is also evident in the legendary account of Mira's end.

Tradition has it that when she was staying at the Ranchhorji temple on the seacoast at Dwarka, Gujarat, her natal and marital families sent a group of Brahmans as emissaries to persuade her to return. When she refused, the Brahmans started a fast unto death outside the temple to exercise pressure on her. Mira was now confronted with a dilemma. If the Brahmans died, she would have their blood on her head. It is believed that after composing the song *Hari, tum haro jan ki pir*, asking

god to save her from distress, she entered the temple and disappeared, having been absorbed into the image of Krishna. This is interpreted by some scholars as her having emerged from the western door of the temple which faces the sea and having leapt into the sea, unseen by anyone.

#### Woman in Bhakti

In the work of *bhakta* poets, all that comes in the way of self realisation through devotion, is criticised and condemned. Most frequently, it is pride which obstructs devotion for which humility is a precondition. Pride may originate in status, power, wealth, learning, ritualistic piety. All these may lead one to consider oneself superior to others and distract one from devotion. However, the pleasure of material enjoyments may also act as a distraction, becoming a substitute for the love of god.

In the work of most male *bhaktas*, including such famous ones as Kabir and Tukaram, woman frequently appears as an obstruction on the path of devotion.



*Kanak kamini*, gold and woman, both represent false intoxication, as opposed to the true intoxication of devotion. They are amongst the strongest lures to tempt the unwary devotee. Love of a human beloved is not, in this tradition, as it is in some *sufi* traditions, a step on the road to love of god. In *bhakti*, the devotee, when relating to god through *madhurya-bhav*, as lover, must take on the role of a woman who is singlemindedly devoted to one beloved — god. The fear of woman as distraction and temptress has deep roots in earlier tradition — witness the many myths of *rishis* losing the power accumulated through *tapas*, because they succumb to the charms of a woman.

Interestingly, we do not find a simple reversal of this idea in the work of women *bhaktas*. Mortal man does not appear in their work as a charmer who must be shunned lest the mind be distracted from devotion. The husband or prospective husband, who often appears in their work as an impediment to the quest for truth, is perceived not as a temptation, but as an obstruction, pure and simple. It is not his beauty or other allurements which must be resisted, but his interference, even tyranny.

What is represented as a temptation is the status marriage confers on a woman — *suhag*. There is a special emphasis on this temptation in the work of Mira. Many other women *bhaktas* use imagery drawn from kitchen and household drudgery in their poetry — the spinning wheel, the waterpot, the cooking fire. Mira's poetry is more replete with symbols of *suhag* — *sindoor*; headornament, bangles. For a woman of the Rajput nobility, marriage conferred not only respectable ritual and social status but also made many luxuries accessible. Dressing in finery was an important privilege of the married woman. These luxuries too recur as images in Mira's work — delicate food, silk *saris*, the high towers of the palace, and, most often, various kinds of jewellery which represent women's special form of wealth.

In popular perception too, these luxuries are seen as a temptation Mira must resist. In the folksong Udo-Mira dialogue,

mentioned earlier, Udo tells Mira:

*There is great suffering in the company  
of sadhus...  
Wear gemstudded ornaments, enjoy  
limitless pleasures...  
Eat kheer and sugar, wear southern  
silks...  
[otherwise] you will get stale leftovers  
to eat and sour whey.  
You will weep, sister-in-law, and die  
or starvation, god will not come  
and meet you.*

To all of which Mira replies by saying  
“Sister Udo. ... you go and enjoy a royal  
life, I have no use for it.”<sup>21</sup>

Nowhere in Mira's songs is the person of her husband (or of any man) described as an allurements. Only *suhag*, the respectable status the husband's presence confers on her, is mentioned. *Suhag*, in her work, becomes a symbol of delusion and *maya* (as woman often is in the work of male *bhaktas*). The woman addressed in Mira's songs is told not to be taken in by it, the implication being that what deludes and lures women is the idea of the married status, which is in fact far surpassed by the mystical marriage with god which springs from within oneself, not from an external source which can vanish:

*Friend, O my friends, let us sport  
together, not go to a stranger's  
house.  
False these gems and pearls, false  
their gleam and glitter;  
False these ornaments, true the  
beloved's garland;  
False these silken clothes, these saris  
from the south,  
True the rags of the beloved in  
which she stays pure.  
Pour away the fifty six delicacies—  
such consumption is flawed.  
Our beloved's vegetables are better,  
whether salted or saltless.  
Why look at others' fertile fields and  
grow envy (in your heart)?*

*Better your own less fertile plot —  
something will be born in it.  
Another's young man may be worth a  
lakh — it has nothing to do with us:  
If you go around with him, none will  
call you good.  
Better your own interior husband  
even if he is a leper:  
When you go with him, all the people  
will call you good.  
A lover like the indestructible one;  
love for him is true.  
Mira has met god — this alone is the  
way of devotion.*

(26)

Against the lure of *suhag*, the woman *bhakta* poses the overwhelming charms of her god. Her attraction to god is natural, spontaneous and so strong that it enables her to break all bonds, confront all opposition. Her energies are directed much more against external opposition than against temptations within. As compared to the number of poems in Kabir, for example, that deal with the waywardness of the sinful mind, Mira has far fewer poems on this theme.

Mira represents her love of god as something that comes to her perfectly naturally, in comparison to which family ties, norms of honour and material luxuries appear artificial impositions. The images used to describe her love are frequently drawn from the world of nature — the gathering of clouds, the coming of the rains, the flowing of the river to the sea, the coming of dawn. All of these are images commonly used by *bhakta* poets. But in Mira's work, the rhythms of nature seem to fuse with the rhythm of the “I” who dances, sings, keeps time on various musical instruments, climbs to the rooftop to watch for Krishna, sets out on a narrow path, laughs and plays.

Mira's God

Mira like many other *bhaktas*, posits her god as a husband and also as a lover, even an adulterous lover. It would be a mistake to simplistically see this as the substitution of one male dominated structure by another. For one thing, many

*Friend, the dark one's glance is like  
 love's dagger.  
 It struck me, and I grew restless; I  
 lost all sense of my body.  
 Pain spreads through my body, my  
 mind is intoxicated.  
 I have found a few friends — all of  
 them are mad.  
 Now I know well who he is — the one  
 who wanders the groves.  
 The chakor loves the moon, the moth  
 by the lamp is burnt,  
 The fish dies without water — dear  
 indeed is such love.  
 How can I live without seeing (him),  
 my heart is not at rest.  
 Go to him and say: Mira is yours.*

(174)

*I saw your beauty and was caught.  
 All my family members and kindred  
 forbade me again and again.  
 Strong had my attachment grown to  
 the peacock crowned dancer.  
 My mind is absorbed in the dark one;  
 people say I have gone astray.  
 Mira takes refuge at god's feet, he  
 knows every heart.*

(9)

*Mother, don't forbid me: I will go to  
 see the holy men.  
 Shyam's beauty lives in my heart:  
 nothing else pleases me.  
 Everyone else sleeps peacefully, but  
 my eyes are awake.  
 The world which does not like Shyam  
 is mad, and without wisdom.  
 Shyman is in my heart, and sleep does  
 not come to me.  
 I don't drink the water of a pond  
 filled only four months of the year;  
 The cascade of Hari's nectar pours  
 down, I will quench my thirst with  
 it.  
 The dark one's beauty is excellent,  
 I will go and took at his face.  
 Mira is suffering from the pangs of  
 separation;  
 Whatever she wants to, she will do.*

(28, trans. Zide and Pandey)



**Krishna lifting mount Govardhan to protect the people of Braj from the torrential rains sent by Indra**

*bhaktas*, including males, when relating to god through *madhuryabhav*, address him as husband and beloved. The mystic marriage, the *bhakta* as bride waiting for god as husband to lift the veil, and as woman pining for her distant lover, are by no means restricted to women *bhaktas*. They are all pervasive in *bhakti*. This is a prevalent idiom of mysticism — not an idiom specially chosen by women *bhaktas* because they happen to be female.

Neither does the image of being the *dasi* or *chakar* (slavegirl or maidservant) of god originate in her femaleness. *Dasyabhav* or the attitude of a slave was one of the five *bhavas* or *rasas* accepted in *bhakti* as an appropriate way of approaching god.<sup>22</sup> The other four were *shant*, *vatsalya*, *sakhya* and *madhurya*, of which only *vatsalya* seems to be absent from Mira's work. *Dasyabhav* is particularly appropriate to emotional *bhakti*, because of its implications of constant proximity, intimacy, complete surrender of will, humility, undemanding service, and a sense of belonging. A large proportion of male *bhaktas* in the Hindi region added *das* to their names — Kabirdas, Tulsidas, Surdas, Raidas.

Inextricable from *dasyabhav* is the refusal to acknowledge any authority as superior to god's authority. Almost every *bhakta's* life has legends attached to it relating to their defiance and even rebuke of authority. One legend relating to Kabir (of which there are variants relating to other *bhaktas*) is recounted in *Bhaktamal Vartik*, wherein he refused to bow to the king, saying he would bow his head only to god. The *bhaktas'* defiance of authorities, secular and religious, is the consequence of their intention to humble themselves only before god, the authority they have freely chosen. Kabir even goes so far as to imagine himself as the dog of god:

*Kabir says, I am Ram's dog, Moti is my name;*

*Ram leads me by a string, I go wherever he takes me.*<sup>23</sup>

Service of god is also interpreted as

humble and selfless service of his people. Numerous legends relating to both Vaishnav and Shaiva *bhaktas* stress the importance of serving the devotees, which is often seen as the highest form of devotion.

Humility and love of god do not indicate servility but self respect. Self respect consists in following the god one has chosen, the god one finds by looking within. One of Kabir's famous *padas* compares the *atma* looking for god to the muskdeer which wanders in pursuit of the fragrance of the musk, not realising that it emanates from itself. The *bhakta's* relationship with god is thus self directed, the fruit of an active, conscious choice, pursued with determined effort. Mira says: "Of my own volition I became enslaved."<sup>24</sup> Language and metaphor stress the element of active decision and choice, which make this enslavement entirely different from the enslavement forced upon one by external social forces.

Mira uses the image of buying and selling to indicate the quality of her relationship with god. Mira is sold to Giridhar and the sentence construction is "Mein to Giridhar hath bikani" (I am sold into Giridhar's hands", not "Giridhar has bought me"). In another song, she buys Giridhar, and here active verbs are used:

*My friend, I bought Govind,*

*You say secretly, I say openly —*

*after beating the drum I bought him.*

*You say expensively, I say cheaply*

*after weighing (him) on the scale, I bought him.*

*I sacrificed my body, my life, and (all my) priceless things.*

*(Mira says) Lord, give me your darsharn, in previous life you promised me (this)*

(22, trans. Zide and Pandey)

An interesting popular version adds some lines which suggest the choice of a spouse (normally a bride but here a groom) who is criticised by others: "Some say he

is black, some say he is fair, I have bought him with open eyes."

The number of Mira's songs which start with "I" or a variant ("me" or "my") far outnumber those starting with any other one word (29 in Chaturvedi's anthology, as compared to 11 starting with Sanwaro or Shyam, which is the next largest number).

It is also interesting that Mira only occasionally addresses the *sants* (as Kabir constantly does: *Santobhai*" Brother *sants*") but very frequently addresses one or more woman friends. Thirty six poems in Chaturvedi directly address a woman friend and about eight others use "He Ri", the mode of addressing a female. Taking on the person of a *gopi* and addressing women friends is a mode commonly used by male *bhaktas* too, but seems more personalised in Mira, particularly in the context of a discussion on *suhag* versus devotion which, occurs in several songs addressed to women friends.

Mira's god, as defined in her songs, does not fit neatly into a *sagun* or *nirgun* category. On the one hand, she celebrates god in the form of Krishna — not Krishna as child (celebrated by Surdas) or as king, but as cowherd, flute player, beloved of the women of Braj, beautiful and delight giving, refuge and protector of the people of Braj and of all those devoted to him.

In no song is there any element of fear of Krishna. She adopts a demanding tone, reproaches him for staying away and neglecting her. Joy resides in presence, pain in absence. Nor in any song is Krishna represented as telling her to do or refrain from doing anything. *He is not a commandment giving but a delight giving presence*. Among the attributes seen in him by Mira, one that seems special to her work as compared to that of others, is the sweetness of his words and his voice which recurs in more than one song, perhaps as a contrast to the bitterness of the words she mentions people as speaking against her.

While she experiences the pain of separation and longs for union with god, she also repeatedly says, in the common paradox of *bhakti*, that god is within her.



“... and a headjewel of gold”

Finding the beloved is indistinguishable from finding that which is within, the self or the *atma*. “The doctor dwells within the sick one, the doctor alone knows the cure” (73) indicates the interiority of the entire experience. The god within is not just the incarnate Krishna, but the *parmatma* with whom the *atma* longs to merge. The *nirgun* aspect is often evident. In this song the complex meanings of this god emerge:

*I am dyed in the hue of the lifter of mountains.*

*Wearing a five-coloured robe\* I go to play a masked game.\*\**

*In this masked game, I met the dark one; body and mind took on his hue.*

*they whose beloveds live abroad keep writing and sending letters.*

*My beloved lives in my heart and*

*neither comes nor goes.  
Mira's god is the lifter of mountains;  
day and night she watches the path  
for his coming.*

(23)

*\*the body, composed of five elements  
\*\*jhirmit, a game like hide and seek, where the players' identity is disguised; here, an image of the atma disguised in the world, searching for the parmatma.*

Although more of Mira's songs to the incarnate Krishna are well known, in a large number of songs, frequently in the same song, she also conceives of god as the *nirgun* god. Without specific attributes, whose name is the key to salvation, and who is approached by the path of wisdom, through the mediation of the *guru*. This

god she sometimes calls Ram, sometimes Giridhar, sometimes Hari or Prabhu. One such famous song is “*Payo ji mainey Ram Ratan dhan payo*”, another is “*Ram nam ras piye manuva*”:

*Drink the nectar of Ram's name.\*  
O people,\*\* drink the nectar of  
Ram's name,  
Give up bad company, sit always in  
good company, listen to talk of  
god.  
Pour away lust, anger, intoxication  
[of pride], greed and illusion from  
your being.  
Mira's god is the lifter of mountains,  
immerse yourself in his name.*

(199)

\*Ram, in Mira's work, is generally referred to in the general sense to signify god, not in the specific sense of Ram, husband of Sita and king of Ayodhya.

\*\* also interpreted as “O heart”.

Another, in which she uses more of the terminology of mysticism, combining it with her own preferred imagery:

*Let us go to the land of the unattained  
on which death fears to look.  
there, on love's full lakes, swans\*  
ever play.  
In the company of sadhus and sants,  
let us garner knowledge.  
Fixing our thoughts on the dark one,  
make the mind bright.  
Tying on the anklet bells of good  
action, dance and dance of fulfilment,*

\*In the case of both Kabir and Nanak, for example, the legend exists that on their death, a dispute broke out between their Hindu and Muslim followers as to whether the body should be cremated or buried. When the shroud was lifted, the body was found transformed into a heap of flowers which the two groups divided up. The physical presence of the body thus transmits a silent but crucial message to the community. The fact that so many women *bhaktas* disappear (Mira Andal, Mahadeviakka, Lal Ded) and their bodies, or *samadhis* are not found indicates in one sense their remoteness from any one specific community.

Adorned with the sixteen adornments  
and a headjewel of gold.\*\*  
Mira is indifferent to all but the dark one's  
love.

\*In mystic vocabulary, an image for the  
*atma*

\*\*The headjewel in Rajasthan is worn by  
married women as a sign of their *suhag*.

An important dimension of the *bhaktas'* conception of god was that of the protector of his devotees in distress, especially the poor and the despised. Legends emphasising this dimension abound. To take just one, Chokhamela, the untouchable *bhakta* who is reproached by the priests for offering food to god and is refused access to him, is justified when god refuses to accept any offerings until he is recalled. Such legends began to acquire the status of the earlier stories of god's redemptive mercy. The *bhiktas'* own compositions helped this cumulative process.

Some of Mira's songs too, apart from referring to the traditional stories of god coming to the rescue of Sudama, Draupadi, Ahilya, Prahlad, Shabri, and the drowning elephant king, also narrate (song 139) how he came to the aid of Kabirdas, by providing for his family after Kabir had given away to a needy *sadhu* all the cloth he had woven for sale; to the aid of Dhanna Bhagat (fifteenth century peasant *bhakta*) by making crops grow in his field though he had sowed no seed, having fed all the seedgrain to visiting *sadhus'*, to the aid of Namdev the Maharashtrian *bhakta*) by restoring overnight his burnt up house, after Namdev, seeing god in the form of the fire consuming his house, had poured into it the few of his possessions that had been saved; and to the aid of Karmabai born c. 017 in Jhansi in a Teli (oil presser) family, by refusing any food but the *khichdi* she offered every morning to Jagannath's image at Jagannathpuri, and which god in the form of a child always ate, after a saint had reproached her for not cooking it in the prescribed fashion, that is, not bathing and washing the kitchen, before cooking, and thus delayed the process.



**Mirabai in a Rajathan temple. The inscription on the base reads "The crestjewel of bhaktas, Shti Mirabai"**

### Mira as Symbol

Although Mira does not directly generalise about women's situation on the basis of her experience, yet her account of her struggle for personal freedom from societal restrictions imposed on her because she was a woman is perhaps the most sharply delineated account that survives in the work of women *bhaktas*. Several male *bhaktas* from lower caste groups who similarly refer to the injustice they encountered or who are constructed through legend as having encountered such injustice (Kabir, Raidas, Chokhamela) became symbols for self respect movements amongst the lower castes. Although they may not have tried to set up sects, groups of people chose to name themselves after these *bhaktas*, explicitly identifying with the egalitarian implications of their message of *bhakti*.

Even today, Kabirpanthis and Raidasis are organised bodies of opinion whose faith has a political and social dimension.

Mira, however, was not picked up as a symbol for any such self respect movement amongst women, even though her life and work would seem to lend themselves very well to such a role. This is true of all women *bhaktas*. None have any sect established in their name, and though many are integrated in mainstream traditions, none have been picked up by women collectively for any specific relevance they may have for women's lives.

While we are not in a position to provide definitive explanations for this difference, some possibilities suggest themselves. When *bhaktas* from lower caste groups repudiate discrimination on the basis of caste, there is not much that is attractive in low caste status which they must give up. In repudiating the role society defines for a woman, of which marital status is a central feature, however, Mira gives up much that is very attractive. She, like lower caste male *bhaktas*, risks opprobrium and attack when she breaks taboos (her entry into public spaces and activities forbidden to women; their entry into sacred places and activities tabooed to low castes). But, in addition, she loses the very limited but very concrete rewards that society offers a law abiding woman. By saying "I will not be a Sati" (*Sati na hosya*)—which could refer either to burning on her husband's pyre or to being a virtuous wife in the tradition of Satis like Sita, Savitri, Anusuya — she gives up the respect a Sati gets, and accepts instead appellations like "*bhakti*" (fallen woman). She has to wear such abuses as her crown: "Whatever was said of me, good or bad, I took it all on my head." (13)

In contrast, lower caste male *bhaktas* who were abused for breaking rules did not lose any praise they could have got by following the rules. There exists no tradition of honouring and exalting obedient Shudras or giving them the exalted, even defied, status of anything comparable to a Sati.

Second, low caste male *bhaktas* who embraced poverty did so while continuing to live a householder's life. One important



difference between *bhakti* as a mode of attaining god, and many other modes, is that giving up a householder's life is not required of a *bhakta*. Most of the male *bhaktas* continue to live with and provide for their families, to perform their caste based occupation, and to do all the social duties required of them. They pride themselves on attaining god through simple devotion, not through austerities. It is this which makes *bhakti* more attractive and accessible to large numbers of ordinary people.

But Mira is not allowed to do this. The ideology of *pativrata*, whereby a woman's salvation lies in unquestioning devotion to her husband, comes into active conflict with the ideology of *bhakti* when the *bhakta* is a woman. Apart from the flouting of secular and religious authority in which all the *bhaktas* have, to some extent, to engage, the woman *bhakta* has also to flout the absolute authority of the husband and his family over her life, since she now acknowledges a higher authority. This conflict makes the simultaneity of *bhakti* and *grahastha*, which is possible for the male *bhakta*, impossible for her.

Once out of the house, Mira is effectively out of her community. The male low caste *bhakta* who continues to live and work at home, and dies there,\* in the midst of the community, becomes a focus for community aspirations. Mira, having become outcasted, or at least remote, cannot function in the same way. The perception of Mira as having been outcasted from her community took deep root. This is suggested by the fact that it appears to survive in some form even today. Parshuram Chaturvedi narrates that when he visited Chjttor fort and Udaipur he was told that Mira is not respected amongst Rajputs there. Padmavati Shabnam says that the folk literature library at Girnar reports that most of Mira's songs were collected from lower caste and Bhil singers.<sup>25</sup>

Mirabai had not only to live an extraordinary life but to prove her extraordinariness by going through ordeals (of which the cup of poison, the snake and the bed of thorns are dramatic

symbols). Having thus proved herself, dared all, broken all barriers, she is exalted and revered, and regains in far greater measure the honour and repute she lost or seemed to have lost by flouting the norms of womanly behaviour. She is now perceived as existing beyond such norms.

But, by being compelled to be so far beyond the ordinary, she becomes a not easily imitable model. Her way remains literally "*anuthi*". Like Kali who may tread on her husband, like certain south Indian goddesses who behead their husbands, she becomes an object of adoration rather than a model or a guide to action for other women.

It is significant, nevertheless, that she finds so honoured a place in so many traditions and media. Her sharpest, most defiant and critical verses are among her best known and have contributed to her special fame. This is in contrast to many cultures where women's writings perceived as outrageous were suppressed, even destroyed, or buried, and had to be recovered from oblivion centuries later.

This duality in dealing with strong and creative women seems to be a characteristic of our culture that persists even today. A woman who is ready to risk everything, by openly defying family, community and social opinion, and by flouting all norms, may be subjected to all kinds of ordeals and temptations — sought to be restricted, married off, imprisoned, even beaten or killed. But if she manages to survive it all and still be creative, she will get not just recognition but a very special kind of honour reserved for such women, almost worshipped as being of a category apart, a heroine, a near-goddess to whom ordinary standards do not apply. She can then get away with much that would ordinarily be considered outrageous.

But her existence and high repute will not of itself become ground for restrictions on other women to be relaxed or for the boundaries of their freedom to be enhanced. Being perceived as extraordinary, she is by definition considered to be in a different category

from other women and the freedom allowed her will not be extended to them.

Though Mira may not have inspired collective action by women, she has certainly acted as an inspiration to many individual women. Despite her not being placed, for literary merit, in the same class as Sur and Tulsi, her songs, because of their superb singability, linger in the memory. A line like "*Pad ghungroo bandh Mira nachi re*" or "*He Ri, mein to prem diwani*" catches the attention for the sense of abandon it conveys. The outstanding melodic quality of her work, making it so suitable for singing and dancing, has ensured its wide reach, and the plain and direct language and sentiment its easy adaptability to many languages.

The paradox of Mira's song is contained in its intense lyricism which conveys the overall emotion of joy even when pain, suffering, separation, are being described. This may, ultimately, be the paradox of all art which, like the *parasmani*, transmutes the painful riddle-of life into lasting beauty, or, in Mira's phrase, changes poison to nectar.

## References and Notes

Translations of Mira's and other *bhaktas*' poems in and accompanying this article are by Ruth Vanita, unless otherwise indicated.

1. Numbering of Mira's songs quoted and referred to in this article follow that in Parshuram Chaturvedi, *Mirabai ki Padavali*, 17th edition, 1983, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Allahabad,"T' from which the translations are also done, unless otherwise indicated.

2. Nabhadass' *Bhaktamal* mentions a Rajput queen, Jhali, who was a disciple of Raidas, but little else is known of her.

3. Chaturvedi, op. cit., pp. 18 and 25.

4. From the excerpt in Chaturvedi, p. 233. See also Sudershan Chopra, *Mim Parichay Tatha Rachmayen*, Hind Pocket Books, Delhi, 1976, 2nd edition, and Nilima Singh, *Mira: Ek Antavang Pari-chay*, Saraswati Vihar, 1982.

5. From the excerpt in Chaturvedi, 234-235.

6. Chaturvedi, p. 21.
7. Vishwanath Tripathi, *Mira ka Kavya*, Macmillan, Delhi, 1979, p. 43.
8. Chaturvedi, p. 220.
9. Nilima Singh, op cit, p. 9.
10. Padmavati Shabnam, *Mira: Vyaktitva aur Krititva*, Hindi Pracharak Sansthan, Lucknow, 1976, pp, 202-205.
11. This is one of the poems listed as doubtful by Chaturvedi, p. 244.
12. Poems from Mirabai, translated by S.M. Pandey and Norman H. Zide, with an introduction by S.M. Pandey, unpublished mimeo, University of Chicago, 1964. All other poems marked "trans. Zide and Pandey" are from this collection.
13. Sudershan Chopra, op cit., p 39.
14. Chaturvedi, p. 240.
15. Chaturvedi lists this as part of a variation of No. 23, p. 106 footnote.
16. Chaturvedi, p. 240.
17. From the excerpt in Chaturvedi, p. 236.
18. Quoted in Vishwanath Tripathi, op. cit., p. 24.
19. Chaturvedi, p. 79.
20. From the excerpt in Vishwanath Tripathi, op. cit., pp. 21-22.
21. Padmavati Shabnam, op. cit., pp. 202-205.
22. In *shantbhav*, the devotee calmly contemplates the incarnate form of god; in *dasyabhav*, the devotee relates as a servitor to the glorious form of god; in *sakhya bhav*, the devotee relates to god as a friend and constant companion: in *vatsalyabhav*, the devotee identifies with the parents of god as a child, and rejoices in the god child's beauty (in a variant, the *bhakta* relates like a child to god as parent); in *madhuryabhav* the devotee as wife relates to god as husband and therefore, all-in-all.
23. *Kabir Granthavali*. ed. Bhagwat-swarup Mishra, Vinod Pustak Mandir, Agra 1986, 4th edition, p. 61, *doha* no. 14.
24. Sudershan Chopra, op. cit., p. 40.
25. Padmavati Shabnam, op. cit. p. 500.