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Rajasthan: Mirabai and Her Poetry

Nancy M. Martin

Mirabai (born c. 1500) is among the most well-known and loved of the Hindu women saints devoted to Krishna. Her devotion to her Lord is absolute, as her life and songs attest. Her story is a romantic tale of star-crossed lovers—one human, the other divine—marked by perseverance and triumph in the midst of great suffering. Songs sung in her name speak of the joys and trials of the devotional life and evoke the full range of romantic love, from the devastating longing that marks separated lovers and the blazing anger of a woman betrayed to the sweet and intoxicating pleasures of union. This woman of the sixteenth century has inspired and captured the imagination of fellow devotees across the centuries, so much so that her story has been told and retold in innumerable forms and more than a thousand songs have been sung in her name. Within the context of the wider Krishna tradition, this exemplary devotee provides an important bridge between the idyllic and eternal world of Braj, where the *gopis* and Radha sport with Krishna, and the world of *samsara*, wherein ordinary people must practice their devotion to the amorous Dark Lord.

The Life of Mirabai

So who was this extraordinary saint? We find her story first among those of other saints, preserved and recounted by devotees of God. But even here, there is no original or first telling that we can identify and of which all others would be variants. Instead, across the

centuries a vast family of related but different stories are told about her, found not only in hagiographic literature but now also in religious, folk and dance dramas, epic songs, film, novels, comic books, and even a television serial that aired in 1997.

Though these stories differ considerably from one another, a general outline of her life story might go as follows. Mirabai was the daughter of the Rathor Rajput royal house of Merta within the feudal kingdom of Marwar (western Rajasthan). Even as a child, she already showed signs of great devotion to God. When she came of age, her marriage was arranged—against her will, by most accounts—into the Sisodiya Rajput royal family of the kingdom of Mewar (southern Rajasthan). As a young bride, she angered her marital family, in the fortress city of Chittor, by her refusal to fulfill her conjugal duties or to follow the rules of behavior for a woman of a royal household and of a Rajput or warrior caste. She should have remained secluded in the women's apartments of the palace, but she sang and danced in the public space of the temple and associated freely with holy men and with people of every caste and class, caring little for the material and social privileges that her royal status afforded her. Though she was praised by some, her behavior outraged others, particularly among her in-laws, who saw her actions as bringing dishonor to the family.

After efforts to dissuade her and then to confine and isolate her failed, attempts were made to kill her. The method and the murderer vary from story to story. Poison is the most commonly recounted method, with the poison said to be *charanamrit*, the holy water used to wash the deity's feet and thus imbued with grace—an ambrosia no devotee would refuse to drink. Other methods include a venomous cobra in a basket, scorpions with a deadly sting, a ravenous lion in a cage, and a bed of thorns, all said to be sent to her by the *rana*, the ruler of Mewar (sometimes identified as Mirabai's husband, sometimes as her father-in-law, and sometimes as her brother-in-law, acting after her husband's death). She is maliciously told that the snake is a diamond necklace or flower garland and the scorpions are jeweled toe rings to be opened only in the dark. But each becomes these harmless and beautiful gifts in Mira's hands. When she worships the lion as Vishnu's man-lion incarnation Narasimha, it lies down harmlessly before her, and thorns placed in her bed turn to flowers. Direct assaults are no more effective. In one telling, when the *rana* receives reports that she is speaking words of love to a man in her private chambers, he draws his sword to kill her. But when he enters the room, he suddenly sees four Miras, and bewildered, he backs away. In another account, when the *rana* orders her to drown herself, Krishna intervenes to stop her.

In the face of such persecution, Mira chooses to leave the great city of Chittor, or in other accounts is forced to do so. Some say she returns to her natal home for a time, but eventually she becomes a wandering holy woman,

renouncing all that the world offers by way of pleasure and fulfillment, completely absorbed in the love of God. She composes innumerable songs of unmatched beauty, singing in the company of the devout and dancing in the temples before her Lord.

She is said to go to Vrindavan, the land of Krishna's youthful incarnation, where she meets Chaitanya's great disciple, Jiva Goswami. In some tellings, he refuses to see her because he has made a vow not to interact with women. She sends back a message, thanking him for enlightening her, for she had mistakenly thought that there was only one man in this holy city (all souls being feminine in their love for the amorous and very male Lord Krishna). Chagrined, Jiva Goswami immediately agrees to see her. Some also say that she took the untouchable leather-worker Raidas as her *guru* and that the Muslim emperor Akbar came to see this great devotee. In both cases, her family members are outraged, but Mira draws no distinctions between those who love God, regardless of caste or religion.

Finally she makes her way to the city of Dvaraka, where Krishna is said to have established his kingdom after leaving the cowherding community of his youth to fulfill his destiny. There she remains, until a delegation of brahmins arrives from the kingdom of Mewar. The *rana's* motivation in sending the delegation is unclear. He may be genuinely repentant for his mistreatment of Mira, and he may have experienced a conversion to the devotional path. His decision may also be merely a matter of expedience—things are not going well in the kingdom, and many lay the blame at his feet for abusing the saint. Or he may want to regain some control over this woman whose actions continue to bring shame upon his family.

Whatever the reason, the priests arrive, insisting on Mira's return to Mewar. When she refuses, they vow to fast until death if she does not do as they say. In the face of such coercion (to cause the death of a brahmin priest is a great sin), she asks only to visit the temple one last time before departing, in order to take leave of Krishna. When others come looking for her within the temple, however, she is nowhere to be found, and only her clothing remains, draped across the image. Krishna has absorbed her into himself, the story goes, freeing her from the world's persecution and liberating her through a union with him. Thus ends this inspiring tale of unwavering devotion and love, in spite of horrific persecution, and of holding fast to the truth, regardless of the consequences.

Songs of Mirabai

Mirabai's unshakable love, her total dedication, and her suffering and triumph over adversity find expression in the songs sung in her name as well as in her story. We do not actually know which songs might have been composed by the

sixteenth-century saint herself. There is no early manuscript record of songs attributed to her to which we can turn even to identify an early corpus of Mira songs. But there is a style of devotion that is identifiably Mirabai's, and a number of songs are commonly recognized as belonging to her, including those translated here. Some songs attributed to her refer to specific events in her life, while others could be songs of ordinary human love but for the names of Krishna and Mirabai. Others could just as easily have been sung by one of the *gopis* or Radha, or by another saint like Surdas, though when Mirabai's name appears in the signature line, the story of her life is invoked, adding another layer of meaning to the song. Mira's name is very often tied to Krishna with the phrase "Mira's Lord is Ghirdhar *nagar*"—the clever or gallant Mountain Bearer—referring to the incident when he held Mount Govardhan aloft over the people of his adoptive cowherding community to protect them from the torrential rains of the god Indra's wrath.

Songs attributed to Mirabai are predominantly in the impassioned mood and language of *madhurya-bhava*.¹ Krishna is her lover, and her tone is often defiant and joyous. She claims that her purchase of Krishna in the market was a steal—the price being her life—and she cries out to her heart-mind (*mana*) to come to the banks of the Yamuna River to see Krishna's beauty as he plays on the far shore. She joins all of nature in the joyous anticipation of his coming and speaks with ecstasy of union, even claiming to have married him in a dream.

At other times, her songs are filled with the terrible longing that comes with love in separation, *viraha*. The embodied existence and separation that make love possible leave the human lover ever longing for complete union with the divine. Mira experiences her Lord's separateness as absence, even when she knows that he dwells within her. Consumed by intense longing, she is unable to eat or sleep or to think of anything but him. Using the standard tropes of love songs, she invokes the rainy season with joy when union occurs but with bitter irony when her divine lover seems far away. And she even accuses him of being a "renouncer," a *yogi*, who has seduced her only to leave her with brutal detachment, so distant and unresponsive does he seem. She vows to become a renouncer herself and to go in search of him. In all these songs, love dominates. Even as the world rejects her, Mirabai rejects the world, choosing only to pursue her beloved Lord—her destiny and her desire in life after life.

Mirabai's Appeal

The popularity of Mirabai rests on the compelling nature of her story and songs, and in the fact that so many devotees can identify with her in so many

different ways. She is of high-caste birth, but she associates with people of all castes and renounces her life of privilege in her love for Krishna. Thus people of high-caste background can identify with her, yet so can those of low caste. The latter admire her willingness to live among them in her renunciation and to take the leatherworker Raidas as her *guru*, thus affirming a system of values that is unrelated to birth status or to wealth. Within this alternate value system, status is measured only by the degree of one's devotion, and the dignity of all is affirmed, for every person is beloved of God.

Further, Mira's appeal crosses the boundaries of gender as well as caste and class. She is a woman who suffers under harsh social restrictions and patriarchal brutality—an experience other women but also men share. She is a person who stands up for what is right and suffers bitterly for holding fast to her convictions, as other men and women have. And she suffers at the hands of the *rana*, whose feudal power runs unchecked. Finally, she is a woman in love, experiencing the full range of emotions that mark love, whether between humans or between human and divine. Men and women alike find themselves in similar situations, and identify with Mira's story as her story becomes their story and her words their words.²

In the intensity of her love and her disregard for societal notions of honor and shame, Mirabai is much like the *gopis* or even Radha, and her voice and character often seem to merge with those of the *gopis* and Radha in songs attributed to her. Indeed, the hagiographer Nabhadās, who first offers us a glimpse of her life in his *Bhaktamal*, or *Garland of Devotees* (c. 1600), makes the comparison explicit. Like a *gopi*, Nabhadās says, she manifests love for Krishna in Nabhadās's own "degenerate age." She embodies the same depth of love and disregard for recriminations as did these young cowherd women who found the Lord so irresistible. And as a woman herself, she is able to manifest that love in the same immediate way, for her female soul and her female body are one.

Yet Mira is also closer to the ordinary person than the *gopis* or Radha are. She struggles to be a devotee in a world that does not understand her devotion and in which people repeatedly try to stop her, to destroy her spirit, and even to kill her. The consequences of her refusal to follow social expectations or to fulfill the traditional role of a wife and woman of her caste are nearly fatal. Thus she offers an important bridge between the idyllic world of Braj, where the *gopis* actualize their love for Krishna, and the mundane world of angry husbands, cruel in-laws, brutal rulers, and slandering and hateful neighbors, in which she and subsequent lovers of Krishna must live out their own devotion. Stories composed about her and songs sung in her name provide an avenue for those subsequent devotees both to find inspiration and to speak about their own experiences, insights, and struggles on the *bhakti* path.

I

Mine is the mountain-lifting Gopal, there is no other.
There is no other, O *Sadhus*,

though I have searched the three worlds.

Mine is the mountain-bearing Gopal, there is no other.

Brother, friend, relative, kin—all I left behind.

Sitting in the company of *sadhus*,

I abandoned the world's expectations.

Mine is the mountain-bearing Cowherd, there is no other.

Watching devotees, I was delighted;

Looking at the world, I wept.

The vine of love grew, watered by the river of my tears.

Mine is the mountain-bearing Gopal, there is no other.

Churning the milk, I extracted the ghee
and discarded the buttermilk.

Drinking the poison the *rana* sent, I attained bliss.

Mine is the mountain-bearing Cowherd, there is no other.

Mira has bound herself to love;

what was to be has come to pass.

*Mine is the mountain-bearing Gopal, there is no other.*³

2

Tying bells to her ankles, Mira danced away.

"I choose to serve Narayan," [she said.]

"Freely I take the servant's role."

Tying bells to her ankles, Mira danced away.

"Mirabai's crazy!" they said,

Mother-in-law said "family destroyer!"

Tying bells to her ankles, Mira danced away.

The *rana*'s gift, a poison cup—

Laughing, Mira drank it down.

Tying bells to her ankles, Mira danced away.

Mira's Lord, that gallant Mountain Bearer,
so easily the Indestructible One was hers!

*Tying bells to her ankles, Mira danced away.*⁴

3

Rana, why should I marry a man
who will die in birth after birth?

I will marry the Dark One, Shyam,
and forever wear his wedding bangles.

What are you doing, Mother?

Marry Mira to the Dark Lover, Sanvara.

Bring joy, not sorrow, Mother—

Marry Mira to the Mountain Bearer, Girdhari.

A deadly snake the *rana* sent
to be placed in Mira's hands;
Making it a garland, Mira was delighted.

Marry Mira to the Dark Lover, Sanvara.

A cup of poison the *rana* sent
to be placed in Mira's hands;
Taking it as holy nectar, Mira drank it down.

Marry Mira to the Dark Lover, Sanvara.

Mirabai says, I sing the Mountain Bearer's praise.

*Marry Mira to the Dark Lover, Sanvara.*⁵

5

*Make me your servant, dear Mountain Bearer,
make me your servant.*

Your servant, I'll plant a garden.
Arising each day, I'll come before you.
In the groves and lanes of Vrindavan,
I'll sing of your love play, Govind.
Let me serve you, dear Mountain Bearer.

In serving you, our eyes will meet.
Remembrance will be my wages.
The land-grant of loving devotion my payment—
Desire of birth after birth.
Make me your servant, dear Mountain Bearer.

Peacock-feather crown,
yellow silk at your waist,
jeweled garland adorning your chest.
Enchanting flute player, Vrindavan's grazer of cows,
Let me serve you, dear Mountain Bearer.

Oh, Lord, I'll plant new groves
with fragrant gardens beneath them.
Dressed in a red sari,
I'll come to meet my Dark Love.

Make me your servant, dear Mountain Bearer.
 At midnight, Lord, reveal yourself,
 on Yamuna's shore!
 Mira's Lord is the gallant Mountain Bearer—
 A terrible restlessness fills her heart.
*Let me serve you, dear Mountain Bearer.*⁶

4

Mother, I bought Govind!
 You say in secret—
 I took him openly,
 beating a drum.
 You say expensive—
 I say cheap,
 having weighted him in the balance.
 Body I gave,
 life I offered,
 sacrificed for the immeasurable price.
 Lord, let Mira see you and be seen.
 Please give her your *darshan*,
 promised in lives gone by.
*Mother, I bought Govind!*⁷

5

Mind, take me to the Yamuna's shore!
 The river's pure water
 sooths the body, burning with desire.
 There, my Dear One plays his flute
 and sings with his brother Balvir.
 So handsome!—
 Crown of peacock feathers,
 Golden cloth round his hips
 Diamonds sparkling in his ears . . .
 Mira's Lord is the gallant Mountain Bearer,
 Playing on the bank with Balvir.
*O Heart, let's go to the Yamuna's shore!*⁸

6

Dwell in my eyes, Nanda's Dear One!

Peacock-feather crown,
 Crocodile-shaped earrings,
 red *tilak* on your brow.

Enchanter's body,
 Dark irresistible face,
 such immense, playful eyes . . .

The nectar-filled flute Murali adorns your lips;
 On your chest Vishnu's garland of jewels.

Mira's Lord gives joy to the saints,
 that Cowherd so fond of his devotees!

*Come and live in my eyes, Nandalal!*⁹

7

I have heard that Hari will come today!

Climbing high up to the palace roof, I keep watch;
 When will you come to your beloved, Great King?

Frogs, peacocks, *papihas* cry out,
 the black cuckoo adds its sweet song.

Indra exults, rain falls all around,
 Lightning dances shamelessly.¹⁰

The earth dons brand-new clothes
 To meet the Lord of the Storm.

Mira's Lord is the gallant Mountain Bearer,
 O Great King, come quickly to meet me!¹¹

8

Sister, in a dream

I married the Protector of the Poor.

Five hundred sixty million strong the wedding party,
 The beautiful Lord of Braj, the groom.

In a dream, the wedding arch was raised,
 In a dream, He grasped my hand.

In a dream, my wedding came to pass,
 Making me ever the auspicious bride.¹²

Mira obtained the Mountain Bearer—
Her destiny of lives gone by.¹³

9

Friend, my eyes have been hit by the arrow of love.

His sweet form has taken over my thoughts
and pierced my heart to the depths.

Friend, my eyes are acting so strangely . . .

How long have I been standing here in this house,
gazing down the road?

Friend, my eyes have been hit by the arrow of love.

The dear Dark Lover is my breath,
The root, the source of my life.

Friend, my eyes are acting so strangely . . .

Mira is sold into the hands of the Mountain Bearer.
People say she has lost her mind . . .¹⁴

10

Hari, I am mad with love—
No one knows my pain.

Only the wounded know what the wounded endure—
the flames that engulf the heart.

Only the jeweler knows the value of the gem—
not the one who carelessly loses it.

Wandering from door to door in agony,
I find no doctor to heal my wound.

Lord of Mira, her pain will lessen
only when the Dark Lover comes to her aid.¹⁵

11

Having enticed me with affection,
Lord, where have you gone?

Having set the lamp of love ablaze,
You left your faithful companion behind.

Lord, where have you gone?

Having launched the boat of passion,
You abandoned it on the sea of separation.

Lord, where have you gone?

Mira's Lord, when will we meet?
I cannot go on living without you.¹⁶

12

*You've done it—you've utterly enchanted me.
Now when will you come to meet me again, O Renouncer?*

Because of you I've taken up a renouncer's ways—
I wake the inhabitants of every house
In the name of the Unseen One.

*Having utterly enchanted me,
When will you come to me again, you yogi?*

In the day no hunger arises,
In the night no sleep comes.
Without you, nothing brings any pleasure.

*Having utterly enchanted me,
When will you come to meet me again, O Renouncer?*

Mira's Lord is the Indestructible Hari,
In meeting him, the flame is extinguished.¹⁷

13

*Come to my home, Dwarka¹⁸-Dweller.
Taking your name, all my troubles go.
Taking your name, all obstacles dissolve.
Come into my home, Dwarka-Dweller.*

The shoot bursts forth from the lotus of the navel,
The shoot grows from the center of my being.
It will reach the house of eternity.
Come into my home, Dwarka-Dweller.

Step by step I will dig this well,
For you, I'll be a servant to fetch water.
Come to my home, Dwarka-Dweller.

I'll make a sacred fire of cloves and fragrant nutshells,
Then the Wanderer will come to Mira's temple.
Taking your name, all obstacles dissolve.

In the sky, I'll lay out a beautiful bed.
Your pretty maid will cover it with flowers.
Come into my home, Dwarka-Dweller.

Mirabai says, Mine is the gallant Mountain Bearer!
 I will become the servant of your lotus feet.
*Taking your name, all my troubles go.*¹⁹

14

Come, Lord Kanha.
I have enchanted the Renouncer!
Come, friends, come and see Lord Kanha.
I have enchanted the Renouncer!

In a brand new pot, I've churned curds;
 Come as a milk-seller to taste them.

In the green garden, I've gathered beautiful flowers;
 Come as a gardener's wife to enjoy them.

I've made a spinning wheel of sandalwood;
 Come as a carpenter's wife to admire it.

A needle of gold and silk thread I have;
 Come as a tailor's wife and take them.

Mira says, I sing of the Mountain Bearer;
 Come and meet my guru Ravidas.²⁰

15

Oh my friend, I was cleaning my teeth
 But abandoned the task.
 I left behind my water pot, friend,
When I heard that flute playing in the forest.
Oh, it kept on playing, so loud, so unceasing...
Oh friend, I heard the flute playing in the forest.

Oh my friend, I was churning the milk
 But abandoned the task.
 I left the baby swinging in the cradle,
When I heard his flute playing in the forest...

Oh my friend, I abandoned the elephant
 ready to ride.

I dropped the horse's lead,
When I heard his flute playing in the forest...

Oh my friend, I left the lamp burning
 And abandoned all hope
 Of living in a palace,
When I heard his flute playing in the forest...

Oh my friend, without Hari
 Mira wept bitterly
 Withering like an unwatered vine.²¹

16

*My love is only for Hari's name;
 My eyes see only my Lord's name.
 I see only Hari's name; I hear only the Lord's name.
 My love is only for Hari's name.*

The bamboo pole of knowledge has penetrated my body;
 The rope of love is pulled taught.
 Drunk with love, I climb up on the rope,
 And, with utter concentration, perform the acrobatic art.
My love is only for Hari's name.

I have thrown down the clay pot balanced on my head,
 Smashed the pot of ego.
 Now with a dancer's graceful steps, I fall at the feet of God.
 I come, snapping out the rhythm with joy.
My eyes see only my Lord's name.

The spout of the pleasure palace will open,
 A thousand drops cascading down,
 Hari, a thousand drops cascading down.
 The cuckoo of love will begin to call.
 These are the things worth tasting, the things of *rasa*.
My love is only for Hari's name.

I walk the path of past traditions—
 People say I go against them.
 O Compassionate One, people say I've gone astray.
 Wounded, I wander here and there,
 And no one asks my heart's feeling.
My eyes see only my Lord's name.

Old books, old scripts—why get hung up on these?
 O Compassionate One, why get hung up on such things?
 Mirabai's is the dear Mountain Bearer—
 All fear of taking the final leap is gone.
*My love is only for Hari's name.*²²

NOTES

1. *Madhurya-bhava* is the emotional stance of love between lovers in all its complexity.

2. For further information about Mirabai's life, songs, and impact in India and beyond, see my book *Mirabai*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

3. This *bhajan*, or devotional song, appears in many printed *bhajan* books and is the first poem of the famous Dakor manuscript, supposedly dated 1585 c.e., published by Lalita Prasad Sukul as "Mira Padavali," in *Mira Smriti Granth*, edited by Sakal Narayan Sharma, Ram Prasad Tripani, Lalita Prasad Sukul, Vipin Bihari Trivedi, Kamali Devi Garg, and Sarak Nath Agrawal (Calcutta: Bangiya Hindi Parishad, 1949), pt. 2, p. 1. This *bhajan* appears in various forms in numerous other collections of Mira's songs as well. *Sadhus* are people who have renounced the world and dedicated their life to religious pursuits. Women renunciants exist, but this term generally refers to men. Gopal is a name for Krishna meaning "protector of cows."

4. This is a popular *bhajan*-book version of this song attributed to Mirabai.

5. Text of a song performed by the Meghwal singer Padmaram in western Rajasthan, recorded in 1993 and available on the compact disc "Meera: Voices from the Deserts of India" (Patrika TV/Ninaad Music, 2000).

6. Dakor MS, *pad* 35 ("Mira Padavali" in *Mira Smriti Granth*). Additional variants are presented by Bhagwandas Tiwari, *Mira ki Pramanik Padavali* (Allahabad: Sahitya Bhavan, 1974), 183-186.

7. Dakor MS, *pad* 13; Parashuram Chaturvedi, *Mirabai ki Padavali* (Prayag: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 1973), *pad* 22; Narotamdas Swami, *Mira Mandakini* (Agra: Gaya Prasad, 1930), *pad* 18.

8. Dakor MS, *pad* 13.

9. Dakor MS, *pad* 46; Chaturvedi, *Mirabai ki Padavali*, *pad* 3; Swami, *Mira Mandakini*, *pad* 1. A *tilak* is a Hindu sectarian mark painted on the forehead.

10. In the translation of this line, I am indebted to A. J. Alston's translation. His choice to interpret the lightning that abandons shame as dancing and his selection of the word *exulting* to describe Indra here are wonderful. *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), 93.

11. Dakor MS, *pad* 45; Chaturvedi, *Mirabai ki Padavali*, *pad* 143; Swami, *Mira Mandakini*, *pad* 70. The *papiha* is a pied cuckoo.

12. The term translated as "auspicious bride" is *suhag*.

13. This song appears in many collections, including Chaturvedi, *Mirabai ki Padavali*, *pad* 27.

14. Dakor MS, *pad* 15; Chaturvedi, *Mirabai ki Padavali*, *pad* 14; Swami, *Mira Mandakini*, *pad* 26.

15. Dakor MS, *pad* 19; Chaturvedi, *Mirabai ki Padavali*, *pad* 70; Swami, *Mira Mandakini*, *pad* 57.

16. Dakor MS, *pad* 11; Chaturvedi, *Mirabai ki Padavali*, *pad* 64; Swami, *Mira Mandakini*, *pad* 27.

17. Swami, *Mira Mandakini*, *pad* 146.

18. After leaving Vrindavan to fulfill his destiny, Krishna settled in Dvaraka, far from his *gopi* lovers, who continued to long for him.

19. Text of song from the repertoire of Padmaram, recorded in 1993.

20. Text of song from the repertoire of Padmaram, recorded in 1993.

21. Text of song from the repertoire of Padmaram, recorded in 1993.

22. Text of song from the repertoire of Padmaram, recorded in 1993.