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## The Spiritual Prodigy, the Reluctant Guru, and the Saint: Mirabai and Collaborative Leadership at Hari Krishna Mandir

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### Comments

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## Article

# The Spiritual Prodigy, the Reluctant Guru, and the Saint: Mirabai and Collaborative Leadership at Hari Krishna Mandir

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**Abstract:** This article explores the life and influence of Indira Devi Niloy (1920–1997) who in 1949 began to encounter the sixteenth-century saint–poet Mirabai during her meditative trance states. She would recount songs, stories, and teachings that the saint gave to her as well as scenes from Mirabai’s life that she witnessed as an observer and at other times experienced directly as a participant. Their ongoing relationship would have a tremendous influence on Indira Devi as well as her guru Dilip Kumar Roy (1897–1980) and the increasingly international community that grew up around them. Their interactions and Indira Devi’s reports in turn would also significantly influence the reception and perceived continuing relevance of Mirabai as both inspiration and authorization for women’s self-realization. Additionally, Indira Devi’s own story reveals a mode of female guruhood, with a distinct absence of identification with shakti or divine incarnation, a more egalitarian model for the guru–disciple relationship, and an alternate bhakti mode of male–female collaborative leadership with Roy. Further their experiences with Mirabai offer insight into the ongoing engagement of women and men with such influential women of the past, the intersubjective nature of the traditions that surround them, and what Mirabai’s message might be for women (and men) today.

**Keywords:** female gurus; Hinduism; South Asia; saints; bhakti; Mirabai; women renouncers; gender; Indira Devi Niloy; Dilip Kumar Roy; women’s leadership



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## 1. Introduction

In a shady lane in Pune lies the small ashram, Hari Krishna Mandir. Its unassuming appearance belies the spiritual stature of the saintly figures who established it and who are memorialized on the grounds outside the small temple hall, where they led their community in devotion to Krishna. Ma Indira Devi (1920–1997) seemed an unlikely candidate for a future spiritual leader. By her own account she was a rather ordinary, if impetuous, wealthy young socialite and dancer, without particular spiritual inclination until she began hearing a voice at the age of 25, asking her if she had come only for this. Dilip Kumar Roy (1897–1980), who would become her guru, was equally an improbable choice. Born into an illustrious Bengali brahmin lineage, he was a brilliant student of chemistry, physics, and mathematics and an extraordinarily gifted singer and composer as well as a prolific writer of poetry, fiction, drama, philosophy, biography and history. A serious spiritual seeker from a young age, he dedicated his life to this pursuit after being introduced to the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and would ultimately find his true guru in Sri Aurobindo. He certainly had no aspirations to be a spiritual guru to anyone himself. But everything would change when Indira Devi met Roy, and again with the coming of Mirabai, and they would go on to become partners in leading a vibrant community of spiritual aspirants.

In 1949, Indira Devi would begin to encounter the sixteenth-century saint–poet Mirabai during her meditative trance states. She would recount songs, stories, and teachings that the saint gave to her as well as scenes from Mirabai’s life that she witnessed as an observer and at other times experienced directly as a participant. Their ongoing relationship would have a tremendous influence on Indira Devi as well as her guru Roy and the increasingly international community that grew up around them. Indira Devi’s reports

of her interactions with the saint in turn would also significantly influence the reception and perceived continuing relevance of Mirabai as both inspiration and authorization for women's self-realization. Additionally, Indira Devi's own life story reveals a mode of female guruhood with a distinct absence of identification with shakti or divine incarnation, a more egalitarian model for the guru–disciple relationship, and an alternate bhakti mode of male–female collaborative leadership with Roy. Further, their experiences with Mirabai offer insight into the ongoing engagement of women and men with such influential women of the past, the intersubjective nature of the traditions that surround them, and what Mirabai's message might be for women (and men) today.

In 1992, in the early stage of my study of the saint Mirabai, I chanced across a volume entitled *Pilgrims of the Stars: Autobiography of Two Yogis*, initially published in 1973. Therein Roy and Indira Devi describe their experiences and challenges across their individual and then joint journey of transformation. The details of their emergent partnership and engagement with Mirabai are most clearly delineated in this volume, though these are supplemented by earlier publications of visions, teachings, and songs Indira Devi received from Mirabai (Devi and Roy 2000, 2002); plays (e.g., Roy and Devi [1955] 1999) and other books composed by Roy; and selected diary entries and collected letters to and from others (Roy and Devi [1964] 2012; Roy 1983), as well as Indira Devi's later remembrances published as *Fragrant Memories* in 1993 (Devi 1993). The following account also reflects my own brief meeting with Indira Devi in 1996 and my conversations with members of their community in Pune in 2015 as well as a short film "Madhur Bhaavi Mira", produced by the community in 2020.

Roy affirms that their decision to write the autobiography was at least in part a response to a letter from Aldous Huxley in which he decried the "vast pseudo-literature" being produced on Asian spirituality and the "mystic East" (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, p. 1). In her introduction, Indira Devi both defines "yoga" and speaks to the nature of a true guru. For her, "Yoga is a junction, a meeting with the Lord, with the Universal Consciousness, with the Supreme Self or one's own highest self. Any effort or method that brings about this union, this inner harmony, knowledge, love or understanding is yoga" (ibid., p. 5). Its "fundamental requirement is the transformation of our lower nature", and the true guru is one who can facilitate such transformation in others (ibid., p. 6). Written in English, their intended audience was an educated and international one and their aim clearly to influence perceptions of authentic Hindu spirituality and to direct others toward the pursuit of realization.

Within this autobiographical work, the first section was written by Roy about himself in first person and focuses particularly on the individuals he encountered who shaped his life, including a number of highly respected spiritual teachers culminating in his discipleship to Sri Aurobindo. The second section, though attributed to Indira Devi, is written primarily in third person. She found it very difficult to talk about her intimate spiritual experiences and would not have shared them if not for her guru's absolute insistence that she do so. Though he had only reluctantly agreed to take on this role, the partnership they established would aid the individual spiritual growth and realization of both and model a form of leadership that remained centered in personal relationships and focused on a bhakti yoga of love and self-transformation. Aware of the inherent danger in foregrounding self, they nevertheless chose autobiography quite deliberately, as their charismatic authority was grounded in their embodied holiness and humility. The spiritual path of love and discipline they called others to follow is revealed in the telling. Yet the journey would be arduous, particularly for Indira Devi, not least because it would begin for her in such a dramatic fashion, her early life offering only vague hints of possible future greatness and many of its challenges inextricably related to her gender.

## 2. The Spiritual Prodigy

The hagiographies of women bhakti saints often ground their devotion in childhood, as A. K. Ramanujan ([1982] 1999) has detailed in his comparative study, and so, too, do

the life stories of more contemporary women gurus, as Marie-Thérèse Charpentier's (2010) analysis of some 70 such women confirms. Indira Devi does not fit this model. In recalling her childhood, she relates some unusual occurrences and a general religiosity in her home but nothing that would necessarily set her apart as a spiritual prodigy. Growing up in the Punjab region of what is now Pakistan in a very wealthy Sikh family, she was sent to a prestigious girls' school from the age of five—when her grandmother found her a bit too much to handle as she remembers it, though such a practice was not uncommon, particularly in families with considerable means. The one example Indira Devi gives of her precociousness was that she released a neighbor's crying calf to join its mother but in doing so ruined the neighbor's milk supply (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, pp. 211–12). Yet this seems not so much an act of mischief as of compassion.

She also remembers saying she wanted to join a convent, suggesting she had exposure to monastic women (perhaps through the school), but claimed she wanted to do this primarily to make the excessively serious nuns laugh, rather than because of any particular spiritual inclination (*ibid.*, p. 213). She would later recall an overwhelming visionary experience that she first had as a young woman, seemingly out of the blue and shared with a friend as a mere curiosity. She heard and then saw a weary Jesus dragging the cross. Falling at his feet in tears she asked him why he allowed people to do this to him. His eyes were filled with immense love as he told her that they did so only out of their ignorance (*ibid.*, pp. 218–19). She would have other such visions of Jesus later in life, and her mature teachings would reflect a familiarity with and appreciation of Christianity as part of a wider affirmation of multiple religious paths (Roy and Devi [1964] 2012, p. 200; Roy 1983, p. 58). She reports further that she grew up in a world where religious affiliation was no bar to association and friendship. In her words, "The Hindus and Muslims lived together in very close kinship till the politicians took their destiny in their own hands, whereupon chaos ensued" (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, p. 237). "God did not play a predominant part in her childhood", though her life would always be marked by "a deep sense of gratitude" (*ibid.*, p. 213).

She would face many challenges, including the death of her mother when she was still very young. However, she remembers this experience not as traumatic but rather as very beautiful. Her mother told Indira Devi that she was "daughter and son in one" and that she would always look after her, and the experience of her mother's dying left Indira Devi unafraid of death, hoping that she might meet it with equal grace when her time came (*ibid.*, pp. 212–13). In the meantime, she had to survive, and the ways she did so begin to point at some unusual destiny. In 1935, she was on summer holiday in Quetta at her grandparents' home. In the early hours of the morning on 31 May, she had a dream that a house of cards she was building came tumbling down, and then she heard a feminine voice repeatedly telling her to run out of the house. Heeding the voice, she called out to an aunt to follow her but to no avail. An earthquake struck moments later, completely destroying the house and killing everyone therein, some 30 people. According to reports at the time, the devastation caused by the quake was immense (Skrine 1936), but what remained central in her memory was the female voice who called her out and "amid all that ruin and rubble a single glass case [that] remained unharmed with the Belgian cut glass all intact", not unlike herself (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, pp. 214–15).

She also tells of meeting a Muslim fakir at the age of seven (*ibid.*, p. 211). In an act of spontaneous reverence and compassion, she picked up his walking stick for him, and in gratitude, he promised that he would be there for her in a time of need. That time would come in the same year as the earthquake, when she was stricken by rabies, having not told anyone of a bite from a neighbor's dog out of fear of the anti-rabies shots. As she recalls being told, the fakir did appear and was able to heal her, though all the best available doctors had been unable to do so and she was on the verge of death. She would report that she encountered him occasionally in later years in meditative experiences, and she and Roy would learn that such a man was indeed living in a cave outside of Nainital (*ibid.*, pp. 215–16). She had escaped almost certain death twice. She was seemingly being

protected for some greater purpose. Even so, but for these incidents, her childhood appears to have been a quite normal one.

When she was 18, she married, and two years later had a son Anil. She enjoyed a life of luxury, wearing fine clothes, shoes, jewelry and the like, and she relished all manner of social engagements and dedicated herself to extensive charity work. Trained in multiple classical Indian styles, she also became an accomplished dancer. There was one thing that did cause her some trouble—her dislike of sex—something she could not explain and that others around her did not understand in one who seemed to so enjoy the company of men as well as women (*ibid.*, p. 217). Yet there is no indication that she ever resisted marriage, and in worldly terms, she had everything a woman could want and expressly enjoyed this life. She was a strong-willed, self-assured and independent woman, telling her husband that she needed the freedom to have her own friends and her own activities, which she did (*Devi 1993*, pp. 120–21).

But after seven years of marriage, her life took a dramatic turn. She began to exhibit increasing psychic abilities, knowing what people were thinking before they spoke, for example. This was not something she tried to do consciously; indeed she could not. Thoughts just seemed to reveal themselves at particular moments, and in subsequent conversations she would find that her perceptions were accurate. This disturbed her, but she really became distraught when she found herself plunged into darkness while speaking before a large audience at a charity event, and she started to hear a voice repeatedly asking her if she had come only for this and to see a skeleton when she looked in the mirror (*Roy and Devi [1973] 1985*, pp. 217–26). The voice came from within, not from any external source. Thus her situation was quite unlike, for example, the eighteenth-century Rajasthani saint Sahajobai whose family guru Charandas challenged her when she was about to marry, upon which she renounced all to become his devoted disciple (*Aveling 2001*, p. xiv).

Indira Devi did not understand what was happening to her. Her husband dismissed her concerns as mere imagination, and he and others around her suggested that she was working or reading or thinking too much and that she should focus on her family, a doctor even recommending that she have another child, which she did. No one around her took her seriously, and she had no spiritual guide, male or female, to whom to turn for help. Still she remained in darkness. Her father arranged for her to meet a psychiatrist without telling her who he was, but she intuited his identity. He assured her that she was completely sane but also an extraordinary person. They would become friends, and she talked with him about her experiences over the years, though he could not explain what was happening to her either (*Roy and Devi [1973] 1985*, pp. 227–29).

### 3. The Reluctant Guru

Some months later in October 1946, Indira Devi would meet the man who would become her guru, Dilip Kumar Roy, when he was in town for a musical performance (*Roy and Devi [1973] 1985*, pp. 232–37). She loved music but could not attend because she was unwell, suffering from the asthma that would plague her throughout her life. When her husband refused to invite him to their home, she sent word to Roy herself. When she saw him, she immediately felt he was the one to help her, though he did not have the same sense in meeting her (*Devi 1993*, p. 131). “In the darkness she could suddenly see the light and Sri Roy was the torchbearer” (*Roy and Devi [1973] 1985*, p. 235). In a dream that followed, he promised to guide her, but she still had to ask him in person. At the time, she reports that she knew nothing about the tradition of gurus but only that Roy was the one who could help her. Years later she would recall

I had seen many a great man in my life, but never had I met a man with such great qualities of transparent sincerity and truthfulness. The better part of myself knew at once that this was my only chance. I felt that if I clung to the feet of such a truth-seeker I was bound to arrive some day at the portal of Truth. Something within told me that this was the channel through which the light should come to dispel my darkness. (*Roy and Devi [1964] 2012*, pp. 4–5)



These were the qualities that drew her to him, but Roy's initial response to her repeated requests was to suggest that she turn toward Sri Aurobindo and visit his ashram at Pondicherry.

In their joint autobiography, Roy portrays himself as a disciple rather than a guru.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Indira Devi, he was a spiritual seeker from an early age. Learning Sanskrit and being introduced to the wealth of Hindu narratives and teachings by his illustrious father, he also learned to sing devotional songs from him. Outside of his songs, his father espoused an agnosticism, but when he sang, he moved others to tears and experiences of bliss, even as his son would come to do. Roy was introduced to the teachings of Ramakrishna and from the age of ten was intent on spiritual realization. With a collegiate education in math and science, he escaped his female relatives' attempt to get him married before he went on to Cambridge University to continue his study of math but also music. He became a highly acclaimed musician, having studied both European and Indian classical styles, yet his desire for spiritual realization continued. He had the opportunity to meet many great spiritual "personalities". When inevitably he was asked to sing, many would immediately be drawn into deep ecstatic states, even as Roy himself would experience profound peace and bliss in their presence. He would find his true guru in Sri Aurobindo and become his close disciple, with an almost daily exchange of letters. Sri Aurobindo remained in isolation, emerging only four times a year to offer *darshan* to his many devotees and disciples, so that they might be touched by his direct presence, however momentary. Nevertheless, he responded to Roy's inquiries regularly in writing.

Roy would give up all his wealth and his worldly pursuits and reside in Pondicherry at Sri Aurobindo's ashram from 1928 to 1950. He portrays himself as an emotional person who experienced periods of great energy and bliss, full of joy, laughter, and love, but also as one who endured devastating self-doubt and depression. Sri Aurobindo would assure him that he could see within him the inner yogi who would reach his goal and who came to the fore whenever Roy sang, his music now a form of worship with the power to elevate and transform those who shared in the experience. Roy would also continue to be a prolific writer—of monographs on philosophy and music, historical and biographical works, novels, dramas, poetry and songs as well as translating and setting to music the works of others. But now all he did he dedicated to guru and God. Others would extol the immeasurable beauty and depth of his singing as well as his great intellect, his infectious humor, and the immense love he radiated.

After their first meeting, Indira Devi's husband invited Roy to come and stay with them for a few days when his schedule permitted, and he did so. At that point, Indira Devi asked him to guide her, still having no idea really what she was asking or what a guru was. He encouraged her to come to the ashram in Pondicherry and to turn to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother for guidance. He continued to respond in this way in the months that followed, insisting that he was only a seeker (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, p. 245; Devi 1993, p. 1). She remained reluctant, conceiving of an ashram as a dreary place of serious unsmiling ascetics. Finally, she decided to go on a dare from family and friends who said she would not last a day without servants and the luxuries to which she was accustomed. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were offering *darshan* 21 February 1949. After this indeed profound experience, Indira Devi returned with other guests to Roy's apartment, where he suggested everyone meditate rather than talk after such a momentous encounter. She knew nothing of meditation, but she spontaneously went into a deep trance lasting several hours. When Roy wrote to Aurobindo about this, he said she was ready and that they would accept her as their disciple (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, pp. 245–48).

She, however, was not ready to do this and returned home to her waiting sons and family. Even so, she felt changed and a stranger, wanting only to sit in silence, and though she feigned interest, everything else had lost all appeal. Moving between periods of peace and ecstasy and of deep darkness and despair, she felt her love for God and guru growing deeper and more central to her very existence. She shared what was happening with no one. "People around her naturally did not understand and were either thinking that she

was ‘putting it on’ or was callous” (ibid., p. 254). She would finally decide to return to Pondicherry after someone angrily but unsuccessfully tried to show she was faking by burning her hand with a cigarette while she meditated. She would stay for six weeks but then again return home, not yet ready to completely let go of her former life, especially her children. In this unexpected onset of deep meditative states and ecstasy, her confusion and restless despondency, and family opposition, her experience mirrors that of many other women drawn into alternate spiritual lives (e.g., [Martin 1996](#); [Charpentier 2010](#), pp. 125–30), although the onset for most is childhood or adolescence, while Indira Devi’s transition begins after marriage and childbirth and in the midst of what she describes as a quite satisfying life. Though some would charge her with this, she herself makes clear that she did not turn to renunciation out of a desire to “escape” anything but was driven by an inner compulsion to pursue realization that she could not resist. In this, she differs from a number of other such women who leave difficult marriages or the restrictions of widowhood on their way to becoming spiritual adepts ([Hausner 2006](#), p. 175).

For his part, Roy recognized Indira Devi as far more spiritually advanced than he was. How could he be guru to such a one or to anyone, being so in need of his own guru’s guidance? For her part, Indira Devi had no knowledge of yoga or of gurus, ashrams, meditation, and the like, and she was equally ignorant of the most basic things about life outside her elite world—she did not even know how to make a cup of tea. She urgently needed someone to explain what she was experiencing. Further, in her own words and Roy’s, she was very self-willed, obstinate, overly sensitive, proud, and too sophisticated, holding herself aloof from others. She needed someone to confront her with love and discipline so that she might cut through even the most subtle forms of self-deception and stabilize and deepen her spiritual experiences. She was convinced that Roy was the person to guide her, sensing his sincerity and commitment to absolute honesty and truth. When he wrote to Sri Aurobindo about her request, he encouraged Roy to accept her as his disciple, saying that it would assist them both in their goal of spiritual realization ([Roy and Devi \[1973\] 1985](#), pp. 329–30, 352). And so reluctantly Roy agreed to take on the role of guru, with Indira Devi as his daughter disciple. At some level, Indira Devi knew what she needed and wanted and did not hesitate to pursue it. Roy would guide her, but he would not demand obedience. Instead he told her repeatedly that she must make her own choices, most especially when she later faced the most difficult decision of her life—whether to run home when she received news that her youngest son Premal was gravely ill or to let go of this final and greatest attachment by remaining at the ashram and praying for his recovery. Importantly, she would insist on Roy being her guru in spite of his reluctance, rather than becoming a formal disciple of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, though they would have welcomed her.

#### 4. The Need for a “Guru”

When Indira Devi again returned home for a time, she faced another kind of serious challenge ([Roy and Devi \[1973\] 1985](#), pp. 258–63). A renowned sadhu insisted on meeting with her. He wanted her to join him, telling her that they were spiritual equals who had worked together in previous lives. He needed her to help him complete his spiritual transformation and promised her great power and fame as his spiritual partner and a “World Mother”, declaring that together they would change the world. Such power held no allure for her (even as it generally does not in the hagiographies of women bhakti saints [[Kishwar and Vanita 1989](#), pp. 86–87]). When she categorically refused his request, he told her she would never escape him. She left and ignored his repeated entreaties to see him again. Within ten days, however, she fell seriously ill, doctors assuming it was related to her chronic asthma. Her mother appeared to her, telling her not to eat anything that was not prepared in front of her. She wrote to Roy about her distress, and Sri Aurobindo told him to go at once to bring her back to Pondicherry or she would die. Subsequent investigation revealed that the sadhu had given something to a member of the family to put in her tea, allegedly to prevent her from leaving and thereby to retain her blessings on



their home and family. Even the combined power of mother and daughter were insufficient to withstand the power of this conjoined social and spiritual patriarchy, and they had no other spiritually advanced women with whom to join forces.

Even after Indira Devi was in Pondicherry, this man appeared to her repeatedly when she was alone in her room at night, the door locked. He told her she would die if she refused him and attacked her, leaving her physically bruised. She wanted to go home and confront him, but Sri Aurobindo counselled against this, warning her that she must let go of all fear as that would make her more vulnerable to him. Finally, one night while she was alone, she saw her guru enter the room—something he would never have done without knocking. She cried out “Jai Guru” and immediately the man returned to his true form, shoving her violently but then disappearing. They would later learn that he died of a massive stroke only a few days later but insisted on being cremated with a photograph of Indira Devi.

This man’s behavior stands in stark contrast to the relationship Indira Devi would develop with Roy and points to the darker side of the power gained through yogic discipline. In the hagiographic literature of bhakti, tantric yogic practitioners are often characterized as the “enemies” of the bhaktas (Pauwels 2010), functioning as “rhetorical others” (Keune 2015, p. 729) to emerging bhakti teaching lineages and portrayed as desiring to become divine themselves rather than to manifest divine love through the surrender of the self. Yogic practice itself was clearly a part of the *sadhana* or discipline of many great renouncer bhaktas across the centuries (Burchett 2019), and Roy and Indira Devi embraced yogic practice to refine and empty the self of all but God even as their predecessors had. The male tantric practitioner who assaulted Indira Devi required a female partner to complete his *sadhana*, but his aim was clearly not self-surrender. In her elevated but vulnerable state of openness, Indira Devi was in grave danger from such a man, who sought spiritual powers for self-glorification and, when thwarted, responded with rage and murderous violence.

Though in the hagiographies of women saints, including Mirabai, they must often deal with the lust, aversion, and rage of male contemporaries, familial as well as religious and political (Martin 2023, pp. 42–47), this episode in Indira Devi’s life points to a more specific danger for women of great spiritual potential. Men may seek to usurp and absorb their power unto themselves and to objectify and use them for their own aggrandizement.<sup>2</sup> At this stage, Indira Devi needed protection, or perhaps more accurately male allies, to be able to escape from the sadhu’s grasp, and Roy, backed by Sri Aurobindo, filled this role. Importantly, she needed this assistance not because she was a “weak” woman but because she was so spiritually open. Even many years later, her continuing vulnerability during her trance states would lead Roy to watch over her carefully and to insist that no one touch or disturb her at these times. Devotees were cautioned not to circulate photographs of her during samadhi, as even these might allow other powerful spiritual opponents a way in to harm her. But they would also relate an incident when another sadhu had tried to look into Indira Devi’s mind. When she felt an energy directed between her eyes, she deflected it back. She explained this to Roy, after the sadhu arrived the next day with a blister on his forehead and he responded to Roy’s inquiry about its cause by suggesting he ask his disciple.

Indira Devi’s relationship with her own guru would be completely different from that proposed by the tantric sadhu who tried to force her into compliance. She and Roy would be “two friends with one Goal, one path and above all fellow pilgrims—pilgrims of the stars”, whose focus was on their mutual spiritual realization and bhakti rather than power or worldly status of any kind (Devi 1993, p. 2). Indira Devi would also frequently refer to Roy as “my Guru, my father, my guide, my friend, and my youngest child”, the latter in part because he was “so guileless and simple at times”, in need perhaps also of her protection and/or guidance (ibid., p. 74). Yet in a roundabout way, the episode with this famous sadhu also lent support to her elevated spiritual stature, for otherwise she would have been of no interest to him.

Within the autobiography, her states of trance are described and named as *bhava samadhi*, *savikalpa samadhi*, and *nirvikalpa samadhi*, confirmed by Sri Aurobindo (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, pp. 266–67, 273–76). Marie-Thérèse Charpentier (2010, pp. 159–60) cites Indira Devi as a rare example of these states being detailed by female gurus but also confirms that they are readily and widely understood as signaling full enlightenment. For her part, Indira Devi makes clear that she did not pursue such states:

All she prays for is to be able to give herself completely, without reserve, in her normal consciousness. It is not her aim to change the world. If she can change herself and let the guru mold her, she is fulfilled. It is possible that some people may change through contact with her, even as it is possible that she may go away unheeded and unknown. Both are the same to her . . . Nothing else will satisfy her. Surrender or God-realization, the two are synonymous. (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, p. 276)

Nevertheless, the description, interpretation, and validation of her spiritual enlightenment recounted in their autobiography would facilitate her becoming a person who did indeed influence others to change. Roy insisted she share these intimate experiences, something she says repeatedly she would not have done on her own.

Portrayed in a chapter titled “black magic”, the powers of the malevolent sadhu also stand in dramatic contrast to the many positive spiritual abilities that would be reported of Indira Devi herself. Again, Sri Aurobindo affirmed the psychic openness that allowed her to read others’ thoughts and feelings and suggested that this might be an asset in the future to her being able to guide them, though she might be uncomfortable at times with it (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, p. 279). These abilities would also expand to feeling the emotions of other beings—the hunger of a starving dog, the suffering of a bullock under the whip, the pain of the plants from the shears of the gardener (ibid., pp. 277–78). As she came to understand these experiences, the distance between self and other dissolved, and her compassion deepened to such an extent that she felt the pain of others viscerally, to the point of being bruised as the bullock was, and she sought to relieve their pain, without distinction.

There would be other “miracles” recounted as well—her foreknowledge and awareness of distant events, Krishna leaving his footprints in their offerings, Indira Devi’s transformation of a handful of dirt into sweet prasada in a trance state, the scent of sandalwood attending her return from such states, etc. (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, pp. 335–51).<sup>3</sup> Similar miracles are reported of other ecstatic saints as well as great yogic practitioners, as, for example, June McDaniel (2023, p. 11) notes of the Bengali holy woman Yogeshvari Devi. Roy and other community members witnessed and shared these wondrous occurrences. They shared them not so much, it seems, for outsiders but rather as evidence of their Lord’s *lila* or play and love for and through Indira Devi. Importantly, she did not pursue such powers either—they were understood to be a manifestation of her bhakti and her advanced consciousness. The most miraculous of all would be her experiences with the saint Mirabai.

## 5. The Coming of Mirabai

It was in 1949 that the saint Mirabai first came to Indira Devi. In the initial instance, while back at home with her family, a song kept playing in her head that was unfamiliar to her. She thought perhaps she had heard it in a film. Finally, she asked a maid to write it down, and only then did it leave her. She sent it to Roy who set it to music, deeply impressed with its beauty. When she returned to Pondicherry, she saw a woman in unusual dress (that others would recognize as Rajasthani from her description) listening to Roy sing. Thinking at first she must be a visitor, when the woman got up to leave, Indira Devi noticed that she seemed to float. A few days later, the same woman appeared during her meditation, and the song she sang carried the name of Mira in the final signature line (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, pp. 281–82).

Looking back many years later, Indira Devi writes that initially she was “shy” even to tell Roy about these experiences, fearing that he might think she was crazy and send her

away. She tried to convince herself that it was only her imagination. But then it happened again. When she did finally tell Roy, he was initially skeptical and told her to just forget it. But her experiences continued. Again she did not understand what was happening to her, but it seemed so real (Devi 1993, pp. 83–85). At the time, she knew little of Mirabai, though Roy was fond of her songs and performed them regularly, even serving as a music advisor for M. S. Subbulakshmi's famous cinematic portrayal of the saint (Duncan 1945/1947). The songs Indira Devi heard were in Hindi, not a language she knew well, and she had to ask Roy the meaning of some of the words. She had studied Urdu and Persian but not Hindi and said that if her concentration waivered when she was reciting a song, an Urdu word would enter in. She had never composed poetry before this either, and some of the songs were in quite complex meters.

She herself doubted the authenticity of what was happening to her, and yet the experience was so compelling. Roy would turn to Sri Aurobindo for explanation and authentication, and his guru provided it, lending his authority to Indira Devi's encounters with the saint and also, importantly, to Mirabai's ability to continue to influence devotees. He would write "There is nothing impossible in Mirabai manifesting in this way through the agency of Indira's trance, provided that she (Mira) is still sufficiently in touch with the world to accompany Krishna where he manifests" (Devi 1993, p. 86, letter of 7.5.50). The fact that the songs were in Hindi also offered further confirmation, in his view:

It is evident that Indira is receiving inspiration for her Hindi songs from the Mira of her visions and that her consciousness and the consciousness of Mira are collaborating on some plane superconscious to the ordinary human mind—an occult plane; also this influence is not an illusion but a reality, otherwise the thing could not happen as it does in actual fact. Such things happen on the occult plane, they are not new and unprecedented. (ibid., letter of 2.6.50)

That Sri Aurobindo validated her experiences, lending his considerable authority to their reality, was vital not only to Roy and Indira Devi themselves but also to others who might otherwise have doubted her. And there would be many who would, accusing Indira Devi of making them up to get attention, of being insane, and the like and psychoanalyzing her and her relationship with Roy. She was fully aware of these critiques, and she and Roy discussed them openly. For her part, Indira Devi would continue to say throughout her life that she would not have believed it herself if it had not happened to her.

She would receive hundreds of such songs, initially only the words but later also the melodies. Roy would set them to music until then and perform and translate them. He also insisted that they be published, something Indira Devi resisted. Indira Devi's own ability to compose poetry and then melodies was also awakened. Though initially there was a separation drawn between the songs she received and those she began to compose, this dropped away, and they were all referred to as "Indira's Mira bhajans". The Mira of her visions would affirm this collaboration, telling her that "the songs she sang to her were as much Indira's as her own", suggesting that these renderings were specifically for Indira Devi, emerging in the space of their relationship, and that she also contributed to them in some way.<sup>4</sup> As this episode makes clear, it was not just songs that Indira Devi would bring back from her visionary encounters but also accounts of conversations with the saint, Mira's interactions with others she observed, and much more.

Often she would slip into trance as she listened to Roy sing, sometimes getting up to dance, and then bring back songs as well as descriptions of what she had seen and heard. Sometimes she would slip from third person to first person as she reported what was happening, and at one point Roy asked her, "Who are you?" She replied, "I . . . I . . . who am I? . . . I do not know. I only know that this outer cast by which I am known is not important. It is what comes through me—my life and strivings, my sadhana—that is important. The rest is of no value" (Roy and Devi [1964] 2012, pp. 197–98).<sup>5</sup> She never claimed to be Mira reincarnated, and when anyone questioned her about this, she would inevitably reply, "It is enough to be Indira, don't you think?" She herself also asked the woman of her visions if she was indeed "Mira", and the woman responded "Names are

not important. The Lord is important. The destination is important, not the small habitats in the way" (Devi 1993, pp. 88–89). On the rational level, she would continue to wonder about the nature of these experiences: "Could it be a hallucination? Autosuggestion?" But with respect to the experience, "[w]hen she was hearing the song or listening to this lady called Mira, it seemed the only reality, all else fell off: all else was hazy and dreamy" (ibid., p. 88).

The Mira of her meditative trances continued to give her new songs regularly and would also tell Indira Devi of her life and experiences and respond to Indira Devi's questions or even unspoken concerns in the manner of a teacher. For example, Indira Devi struggled throughout her life with intense experiences of pain, including repeated heart attacks to which she might easily have succumbed, and she asked Mira for advice on how to deal with this. Often Mira taught using her own life as an illustration but also with short parables and everyday examples. In this way, she acted as a guru to Indira Devi, one who shared her experience as both a spiritual aspirant and a woman moving through a world that was both spiritually and socially dominated by men. Indira Devi would report that "after every experience the consciousness changed a little, the heart became a little purer, a little more understanding and tolerant, a little more humble" and her meditative experiences "deepened" as did her capacity to love God and guru (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, p. 295). The exchanges were very personal, directed at the circumstances of Indira Devi's life, and thus they too have a collaborative nature, the lives and characters of Mira and Indira Devi intertwined therein.

In these interactions, Mirabai in part confirms a characteristic of female charismatic spiritual influencers, identified by June McDaniel (2023, p. 19): as a woman, she could understand and address dimensions of Indira Devi's experience in ways that Roy as a man could not. Mirabai's responses are also deeply shaped by Indira Devi's needs and questions. The stories Mirabai tells of her own life as well as the parables she offers are told as they are *for Indira Devi*, in ways that speak to her life and when she is ready to hear them. Such directed speech is characteristic of oral religious teaching—stories are told to specific people for specific reasons in specific contexts, even as songs are also sung in this directed manner in intersubjective performance spaces. Variations in the wider narrative traditions surrounding Mirabai, I have argued elsewhere, similarly speak to and mirror the needs of those who find guidance and inspiration from the saint (Martin 2023). In Indira Devi's case, she benefited much from such a female guide as presumably others, too, have from the stories and songs of Mirabai and will continue to do from the particular teachings and songs that Indira Devi received within her encounters. "Indira's Mira bhajans" reflect a similar specificity, with Indira Devi's own creativity, insights, needs, and emotional states woven through and articulated within them, even as those of others have been in Mira songs through the centuries, reflecting the ways the saint speaks for and to them.<sup>6</sup>

Roy and Indira Devi also both affirm that Mira came as much or more for Roy's sake (e.g., Devi 1993, p. 89). He relished the revelations from Indira Devi, sometimes reflecting his mood at the moment or seemingly directed specifically to him, and he would sometimes request that Indira Devi ask Mira specific questions on his behalf. With time he too would begin to be able to hear and converse with Mira, though never to see her. The death of his own guru Sri Aurobindo on 5 December 1950 would leave him despondent and lost, not knowing how to move forward. Indira Devi reports that on 1 October 1951 she came out of her meditation at 3:00 am and after searching, found Roy standing "on the pier—gazing at the sea", wanting to end it all because his guru had been everything to him. In this moment she challenged him ever so gently to live *for* his guru instead. In entries from his own diaries published with the second installment of Indira Devi's Mira bhajans, *Premanjali* (1960), he recorded that around midnight on that same date he, too, heard Mirabai speak directly to him for the first time.

Though earlier Indira Devi had mediated her presence, after this point, he wrote, "her spirit spoke to me, day after marvelous day, consoling me, guiding me—sometimes, even arguing and fighting with me like a mother bent on taming an intractable child" (Devi and

Roy 2000, p. 63). He goes on to report many conversations he had with her and speaks of “invoking” her rather than just waiting for her to appear (ibid., p. 71). At one point he asked Mira directly whether she had come to him as a guru, and she responded

I can say once and for all that I am nobody’s Guru and as such can never insist that you must follow my advice at every turn. All I claim is that I have a little more experience than you have and so maybe [sic] taken as a friend who can give you some help from time to time . . . I have been sent to you by Him and . . . I come to you in no other capacity than that of a friend who knowing a little more than you do, may aid you a little in your quest. (ibid., p. 80, entry on 14 May 1952)

In her answer, Mira affirmed the type of guruhood that both Roy and Indira Devi would themselves embody. Roy would continue to experience her teaching in much the same way that Indira Devi did, and it is apparent that she also addressed them together as well as continuing to send teachings and songs through Indira Devi’s trance encounters (ibid., p. 68).

Roy would insist that Indira Devi share the songs and her experiences of Mirabai with their community and allow him to publish them. For her, this was very difficult because these encounters were so intimate, so precious, so real. When I met her in 1996, she did speak to me about them but also said that my questions were like sticking a knife into an open wound. Yet Roy was adamant that she share them. Mira did not come only for her, he said. He avoided making his own spiritual experiences public as a general rule, yet he detailed hers as well as Sri Aurobindo’s explanations and affirmations of her ascension to higher and higher levels of consciousness in her samadhi trances. In doing so, he affirmed Indira Devi’s authority and challenged her to overcome her reserve, even as his refusal to speak of his own experiences was a sadhana of humility for him.

Speaking of such visionary encounters in Catholic contexts, historian Robert Orsi describes them as “abundant events”, that involve not only the figure encountered and the one seeing but also those who witness the event, with expanding circles of influence on all those impacted by it (Orsi 2016, pp. 66–68). Certainly, this is the case with Indira Devi’s experiences with Mirabai. Though initially she might only have revealed them to Roy in private, the encounters came upon her so readily, particularly when Roy sang, that others witnessed her slip into trance and were there to hear her relate what she heard and saw mediated by Roy. They, too, would partake of Mira’s teaching and experience, her “message of love”, which Roy described as “filtering through Indira’s consciousness”, “one with hers” or “speaking through her” (Roy and Devi [1964] 2012, p. 153). Even as Mira and Indira Devi had each declared, the message was what was important, not precisely who the speaker was, and to be in the presence of Indira/Mira, devotees reported, was electrifying.

## 6. Collaborative Leadership at Hari Krishna Mandir

In 1953, Indira Devi and Roy embarked on a world tour after Roy was invited to teach Indian philosophy and music and Indira Devi dance at Stanford University, and they performed across Europe, Roy singing and Indira Devi dancing (Devi 1993, pp. 33–34). They had taken a vow not to speak to anyone about their financial needs and only to accept what was given, and this did not include any form of remuneration or strings of any kind attached to support. The Indian government stepped in to pave their way, and the generosity of others allowed them to spread their message of love internationally and in doing so develop a network of international followers. When they returned, Roy longed for solitude so that he might focus only on “writing, music, meditation, and . . . singing”. They left Pondicherry behind and shifted to Pune, at first living in a house provided by a friend and eventually establishing Hari Krishna Mandir in 1959. Indira Devi and Roy resided there, and many others came for evening gatherings to listen to Roy’s teachings and songs and to witness Indira Devi’s revelations from Mira. All remember the atmosphere as one of serious aspiration but also of love, laughter and delight.



Indira Devi and other community members referred to Roy as “Dada”, “elder brother”, and they to Indira Devi as “Didi” or “elder sister” and later as “Ma” or “mother”. Roy eschewed the usual elevation of the guru and the equivalence of guru and God. Within the community, he affirmed the equality of all, declaring “We do not believe in any caste or creed” (Devi 1993, p. 39). All work in the ashram was to be voluntary, and all assistance to those in need carried out as service. What mattered was the disciplining of the self and the cultivation of love to the exclusion of all else, and Indira Devi and Roy led their community and ever widening circles of devotees on this path of surrender, compassion, and humility. They maintained their identity as bhaktas and yogis, having left all else behind in their desire for God and spiritual realization, and led a radically inclusive community, in both social and religious terms. Praise of Krishna intermingled with songs to Shiva and the Devi and readings from the Sikh scriptures, outdoor altars honored an immense range of deities and spiritual teachers, and depictions of Jesus, too, adorned temple walls. Those gathered similarly came from diverse backgrounds, with Indira Devi’s younger son Premal among them, welcomed as one of her many children, all of whom she embraced with boundless love and care.<sup>7</sup>

Indira Devi never claimed to be other than a disciple to Roy, whom she always revered as her guru, father, and guide, but the two were also fellow pilgrims and friends, walking together toward a shared goal, and they jointly led the community, their authority based on having “a little more experience” and sharing it with those who might benefit from it, in much the same way Mirabai had told Roy that she did with him. Indira Devi continued to value Roy’s guidance—to understand her experiences, to overcome her limitations, to step into her full potential, and to learn to surrender all that she held back, most especially her ego and pride—and he played an essential role in validating and encouraging her spiritual authority in multiple ways. Yet he also benefited tremendously from her presence in his life and did not hesitate to say so. He reports

her spiritual help and personal example proved a corrective to my incurable tendency to vacillate and doubt . . . She did need the support of my strength but no other prop. She looked at me somewhat like a helpless daughter who, paradoxically, leaned on her father in order to help him”. (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, p. 352)

In this way, they effectively demonstrated a collaborative and largely egalitarian male–female mode of leadership, while also deliberately modeling a form of religious community that was highly personal in nature so that they might individually guide those who turned to them.

Mira, too, became an essential part of both of their lives, enriching their spiritual practice and that of the community immensely. In Indira Devi’s words

Miraji’s subtle but constant influence helped their aspiration. The whole place had a charmed aura about it. They referred to Mira as if she were a living guide or friend, a person who hardly spoke yet said so much through her songs: whose silence was so eloquent, her presence so vivid, yet she may have been a dream! They seemed so interwoven, so overlapping, and yet so far apart, so different. (Devi 1993, p. 99)

Indira Devi’s Mira bhajans fueled Roy’s devotion and faith, his singing led her into samadhi, where she received more bhajans and teachings, and their followers were drawn into Mirabai’s presence and the experience of divine love through both. A number of the songs and visions also opened out into the lila of Krishna’s divine incarnation in Vrindavan, and thus Krishna and this realm were also manifest among them. For her part, Indira Devi would affirm the vital importance of Roy’s singing to her almost instantaneous movement into higher levels of consciousness and transformative experience such that she almost never heard a whole song (ibid., p. 24).

At times, even Indira Devi appears to have wondered if Mira might be a submerged part of her own subconscious. In such a reading, Indira Devi could emerge as a spiritual



teacher in her own right through Mirabai's voice and also serve in some sense as Roy's guru, something she could not readily do as his disciple. Yet she makes clear that she never thought she was Mira. She experienced the saint as a distinct and real being, though at times the lines between their identities became fluid in the intersubjective spaces of her trance experiences, and Roy did too. In any case, the message and path that Indira Devi and Mirabai articulated were one and the same, backed by their joint authority and embodied in each of their lives.

I have documented other women who have drawn on Mirabai's example to understand their own spiritual experiences and to craft alternate lives as independent spiritual leaders drawing on her precedent—Krishna Ma of Mathura and Bansidhari Mira, Mira Mataji (Sant Lakshmi Bai), and Miraji residing in Vrindavan in the 1990s (Martin 1996). And there are others who have turned to her in a variety of ways—among them the nineteenth-century poet-singer-saint Radhabai (Jhaveri 1914, p. 212), the twentieth-century Marwari saintly devotee Banasa (Horstmann 2003), a community of Dadupanthi female renunciators (Horstmann 1983, pp. 395–96), and Nath and Dasnami female sadhus (DeNapoli 2010, pp. 315–20) in Rajasthan as well as advaita female sadhus in Haridwar (Khandelwal 2004, p. 42). Male devotees, too, have experienced Mirabai as guru, among them philosopher theologian Bankey Behari, author of the most widely distributed popular “biography” of the saint (Behari [1935] 2008), and S. V. Aiyar, a leader of the Madras Radha-Krishna bhajana movement in the early twentieth century, understood himself to be possessed by her (Singer 1966, pp. 110–11).<sup>8</sup> Mirabai and several other saints are also said to have spoken through the Bengali female guru Jayashri Ma, “believed by her disciples to be an incarnation of a form of Kali” (McDaniel 2004, pp. 120–21).

While also demonstrating Mirabai's power as precedent, model, and guide, Indira Devi's case takes our understanding of this influence to a whole different level. The saint came to her unbidden and guided her directly over an extended period of time, in ways that complemented Roy's counsel. Mira indicated that they had known each other across lifetimes and that she would continue to reveal more and more to Indira Devi as their relationship grew. Indira Devi for her part marveled that the saint seemed to grow with her (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, p. 360). Hundreds of songs of exquisite beauty were generated through their encounters. The saint also seemed to want something from Indira Devi (and Roy)—to carry on her message, to collaborate with her to ignite the fire of desire and aspiration in others for realization and love. Indira Devi's contact with Mirabai served as another powerful source of her own religious authority, and the saint effectively modulated the relationship of Indira Devi and Roy in a way that facilitated their functional equality.

She also appeared to Roy in his time of greatest need, guiding him to a vision of Krishna and speaking with him, individually and importantly also with Indira Devi in a three-way conversation. This shared experience adds another significant dimension to the experience of her presence. Indira Devi and Roy were cosmopolitan, highly educated people of their time and ours, reasonable and critical in their thinking, and highly respected spiritual leaders, who evinced a skepticism toward their own experiences and were aware of how their claims might sound to others and the critiques that would be leveled at them. Yet these experiences were very real to them, with tremendous impact on their lives and through them on countless others. As Orsi suggests, to understand human religiosity or even human life fully, we need to take seriously what people say about their experiences of presence (Orsi 2016, p. 252), and I would argue, to understand the influence of saints like Mirabai on women (and men), we need to understand them not just as exemplars from the past but as present and powerful realities in the lives and emergent identities of individuals and communities. Mirabai has clearly played this role in a variety of ways for numerous individuals and most definitely for Indira Devi and Roy.

The Mirabai of her visions told Indira Devi that she was delighted to have her songs once again being sung, songs that she composed with her very “life-blood”. For her part, when Indira Devi spoke of Mirabai, she emphasized the saint's immense strength—the particular spiritual strength that women have—“to endure, to stick to what they believe

to be true, and to rise above all mediocrity and what the world says or doesn't say".<sup>9</sup> Her message to women was that they should be like Mirabai in this respect and embrace that inner strength within themselves. Certainly, Indira Devi demonstrated her own strength in all these ways, even as she facilitated Mirabai's continuing power as an influencer. She did so in a very public way through the many publications of her experience (granted initially at Roy's instigation and insistence) and through the public performance of the songs. She did so also by teaching some of her Mira-bhajans to M. S. Subbulakshmi who added them to her repertoire and who for many remains the recognized voice of the saint (Roy 1983, pp. 112–13; Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, p. 190). And it was Indira Devi's disciple, the superstar Hema Malini, who would play the role of the saint in S. S. Gulzar's (1979) "Meera", a film that has subsequently introduced so many to Mirabai (Mukherjee 2017, pp. 161–62). Like so many other women gurus as well as the saint, the focus of Indira Devi's life and teaching was love, flowing outward through her in action and song. Who she was did not really matter, she reiterated. It was this message that was and remains so vitally important. In this, she and the Mirabai of her visions were in agreement but equally on the urgent need to manifest this love in the world and the importance of inner strength and conviction and of women to do so.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The following details are given by Roy in Part I (pp. 13–205) of *Pilgrims of the Stars: Autobiography of Two Yogis* (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985).
- <sup>2</sup> A parallel episode of Mirabai encountering such an evil tantric sadhu who tries to usurp her power for his own ends and nearly kills her has been incorporated into the Sagar IMTV Meera series (episodes 101–104, December 15–17). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEk5F96svcw> (accessed on 10 March 2024).
- <sup>3</sup> A number of these miracles are recounted by Roy in letters published in Roy and Devi ([1964] 2012), *The Flute Calls Still* (e.g., pp. 132–36) and in Roy (1983), *The Rounding Off* (e.g., pp. 17, 40–41).
- <sup>4</sup> Indrasen, Prof., "Introduction to *Shrutanjali*", reprinted in (Devi and Roy 2000, p. 14).
- <sup>5</sup> Indira Devi, quoted in a letter by Roy to Thomas E. Powers, 1 April 1960, in (Roy and Devi [1964] 2012, pp. 197–98). June McDaniel (1989, p. 199) reports Anandamayi Ma making similar responses when asked about her identity.
- <sup>6</sup> For a comparison between "Indira's Mira bhajans" and the wider corpus of songs attributed to the saint, see (Martin 1995, pp. 350–71).
- <sup>7</sup> Community members also report that Indira Devi's husband came to live at the ashram in his later years and that he was welcomed and cared for by her (Personal Communications in 2015).
- <sup>8</sup> For further discussion of these examples, see (Martin 2023, chap. 6).
- <sup>9</sup> Indira Devi in "Madhur Bhaavi Mira", produced by Hari Krishna Mandir, Pune, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gkr2Lco7YQQ> (accessed on 21 November 2023) (25:00–27:11).

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