

The Great Oral Tradition of Bhakti: The Enigma of Mirabai's Life and Poetry

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Bhakti movement has been seen as a secular movement. Even in terms of literature, the shift from the hegemonic Sanskrit literature to the secular Bhakti is believed to have occurred towards the end of the first millennium. A. K. Ramanujan observes: "A great many-sided shift occurred in the Hindu culture and sensibility between the sixth and ninth century... Bhakti is one name for that shift..." (103) the characteristic feature of Bhakti literature is that it is devotional and religious in nature but, important factor is that it broke away from the traditional canonical literature and ritualism. Though it is religious in outlook, it is far more complex and many faceted. It is in sharp contrast to the earlier Sanskrit literature which is elite, Brahmanical and conventional. The spirit of freedom attached with the Bhakti literature makes it more elusive in the sense of authorship. Similar songs are attributed to different authors living in different regions. The poetics of Bhakti literature is radically different from the Classical Sanskrit texts as Bhakti

literature presupposed the performance. The 'bhajans' and the 'pads' were meant to be part of the 'kirtan', to be sung and performed aloud. Music, dance, rhythm, recital incantations were essential aspects of these compositions.

However, as Hawley sees it the Bhakti literature cannot be put under the heading of 'author' but it can certainly be understood in terms of 'authority' which means 'person or body having authority personal opinion or influence'. It is in this sense that the Bhakti literature has been attributed to different authors. In case of similar ideas and verses it was the region that decided the authorship which ever Saint held the 'authority' was assigned the authorship of a particular song. Sheldon Pollock, in his essay on "New Intellectuals in Seventeenth century India" has shown that for centuries many Sanskrit texts excluded the names of the authors and the participants who took part in intellectual discourses. Other scholars such as Christian Novetzke have suggested that the text (or

performance) is the creative property of groups of individuals which make up a complex author.

The fact that emerges from the above discussion is that there must have been many additions, deletions, amendments and modifications in the form as well as the content of the poems by the subsequent generations who carried on the oral traditions but the plethora of detail, contradictory though it often is, brings one's attention as Novetzke puts it, to the living legacy and the patterns of authorial agency that surrounds their names, a tradition of literature, history, practice and performance that may be fragmentary but is certainly not accidental. There is not a single author but a myriad variety of authors scattered over a few centuries of social, religious, cultural and linguistic change, but the authority is one, whose signature the poems bear.

Mira Bai is an enigma as far as historical evidence is concerned, important dates and places pertaining to her have not chronicled anywhere in history, despite the fact that she belonged to two important families of Medieval Rajasthan; by birth to the Merta family and by marriage to the Mewar family. The reason of her absence from important records is simple, her in-laws

considered her as a blot on the family name and as a result her existence has also been obliterated from the glorious songs of Charans and Bhats who sang songs only about the Kings, queens and the warriors. Despite a deliberate attempt to keep her out of the Historical documents by the mighty and the powerful, Mira has survived in the popular culture, and she has reached us down the centuries through a powerful oral tradition that the masses have carried forward. Her Bhakti, her rebellion against the mighty and powerful ones, her submission to the lord has kept her alive in the consciousness of the generations that followed.

The reason of the survival of her story despite deliberate repression has been variously analyzed by scholars, Nancy M Martin in an article on Mira says "Something about this irrepressible woman has caught people's imaginations, people who have found in her inspiration and hope but also multiple points of identification – women struggling to overcome social and familial expectations; low-caste communities facing oppression and degradation; nationalists seeking independence from colonial domination; star-crossed human lovers and would-be

lovers of God; spiritual men and women trying to live against the grain of worldly notions of power, wealth, and success; and others seeking to be true to their hearts and to follow their passions. And this appeal has reached across time and culture, to touch the lives and hearts of people far from India and far from the bhakti world of medieval India in which she lived.” (13) It was perhaps this compulsion that has kept the saint alive in the memories of the people.

Historical information about the life of Mira is a matter of some scholarly debate. The oldest biographical account was Priyadas's commentary *Bhakti rasabodhini* on Nabhadas' *Bhaktmal*, Sri Bhaktammal in 1712, wherein he refers to a person named Mira who came from Merta who was poisoned by Rana. Frances Taft in her essay 'The Elusive Historical Mirabai: a Note' has reviewed the process by the means of which the current consensus on Mirabai has been reached about her life and works. She clearly takes a binary position with historical reconstruction on one hand and the hagiographical constructions on the other. The first record leads to the 'historical Mirabai and the second produces' a myriad of traditional and popular Mirabais that have evolved. Parita Mukta asserts that there is a

Rajput attempt to obliterate the memory of Mirabai. Nancy Martin also agrees that we lack a historical frame to associate with Mirabai's life. Nevertheless there are many aural histories, which give an insight into this unique poet and Saint of India.

A J Alston, in introduction to his translation of Mirabai's poetry draws a tentative detailed life sketch based on his extensive research on Mirabai's life and works. Like most of the modern accounts, it stems from the work of Munshi Devi Prasad entitled "Miran bai ka Jivan Charitra", originally published in 1905. But it incorporates modifications of Devi Prasad's view, deriving from Acharya Parashuram Chaturvedi, M.M. Gaurishankar Hira Chand Ojha, Hermann Goetz and other authorities. In her work entitled "Miran: Vyaktitva aur Katitva", Padmavati "Shabnam" has set out sources from which Mirabai's biography has been gradually built up, and has reviewed and critically examined the main efforts that have been made to reduce them to an intelligible whole. She concludes that Devi Prasad's story of Mirabai is no more than a figment of imagination but, there is certainly an attempt to reconcile data about Mirabai's birth and marriage that he found in the archives of Mewar (Mahkamah-e-

Tavarikh, Mewar) with the few facts that are known about the History of the Rajputs at the time, the data available in the poetry attributed to Mirabai and the data available in later day hagiographies. Deviprasad depended on a word of court minstrel whom he consulted and who claimed to be in possession of the correct tradition, though other traditions have equal claims. Therefore the sketch drawn by Deviprasad was a flimsy one, yet it was at least based on some documentary evidence. As a result Alston depended to some extent on Devi Prasad's view and largely presents the consensus view.

According to the consensus view, Mirabai was born about 1498 A.D. as the only daughter of Ratna Singh, a Rajput noble of the house of Rathor. She was born in a village in the neighbourhood of Merta. Her mother died when she was still very young, since the father was much occupied by war, she was sent to live with her grandfather Rau Duda ji in the palace of Merta, the city which he had taken from the Muslims in the year 1461 and peopled with Hindus. There she was educated in company of her cousin Jaimal, the Rajput hero. It has been asserted on the basis of a reference to a "copper plate" that "Mira was educated in the Vedas,

Puranas and Upnishadas by a Purohita called Gajadhara, who later accompanied her to her husband's home at the time of marriage." (Alston 2) Alston opines that an education in Sanskrit, music and dancing would not have been out of place in a Rajput princess of Mirabai's days. There is a tradition that even before Mirabai's mother died, Mira had begged for a Krishna's image which was in possession of a holy man who had visited their house. There is a further tradition that Mirabai's mother had jokingly told her that Krishna was her bridegroom. There is a reference to her childhood love for Krishna in her poems.

Around 1516 Rau Duda ji died. Mirabai's father Ratna Singh was still away engaged in battles and her uncle Viram ji assumed responsibility of her education and welfare when he succeeded to her father's kingdom. Meanwhile in 1508 the great warrior Rana Sanga of the house of Sisodiya had succeeded his father Raimal to the kingdom of Mewar, and ruled at Chittor, which was about 150 miles from Merta across the Aravali hills. He was the leader of the Rajputs and the only hope for unity against the Muslim powers that already hemmed them in on all sides and were soon to be

augmented by the arrival of Babur. In 1516, Rana Sanga sought to cement his position by marital alliances. He married Dhan Bai of the Jodhpur branch of the Rathors, which rules beyond the north-east boundaries. He arranged with Viram Dev the marriage of Mirabai with his own heir apparent, Prince Bhoj Raj, thereby securing the allegiance of the power immediately to his north. And he entered into a marriage alliance with the power on his north-west border by marrying Karmavati Bai Sister of Hare Rau, king of Bundi. It was this last alignment that boded ill for Mirabai. For fifteen years later, in 1531, when Rana Sanga had been dead over three years, Karmavati's son Vikramaditya acceded to the kingdom of Mewar at the age of fourteen, and Mirabai was exposed to the spite of rival house.

After the death of Rana Sanga, the son of Dhani Bai succeeded to the kingdom but queen Karmavati had a prominent place in the regency. Though Ratna Singh's mother was a member of the Jodhpur branch of Rathor family, there was no sympathy for Merta branch in the court circles and an expedition was sent to attack Mira's uncle Viram Dev, according to Chaturvedi, this perhaps was the beginning of the isolation for Mira, which drove her to the complete

rejection of the values of the society in which she was brought up.

Poems suggest that Mirabai was not allowed to receive Sadhus in the women's quarter at the palace, she began to sally forth to the temple and mingle with holy men and women and dance before the image. According to one of the reports found in the Archives of Mewar, it was under the reign of Ratna Singh that the persecution of Mira had begun. Ratna Singh was killed in a scuffle in 1531, this led to the installation of queen Karmavati's son Vikramaditya as Rana, who was only fourteen or fifteen at the time of ascension. A report found by Munshi Devi Prasad in the Archives states that Vikramaditya first locked Mira in with a guard and then made an attempt to poison her which also failed.

Alston points out that although Devi Prasad was able to claim some sort of documentary evidence for the birth, marriage and persecution of Mira, the rest of her biography is a guess work based on popular tradition or hagiographies. After the expulsion of Viram Dev from Merta, there are two stories about Mira, one stated by poet Dhruvdas and Priyadas leads one to believe that Mira went to Brindavan and had a dialogue with Jiva Goswami who refused

to admit her as she was a woman, Mira retorted back by saying that she thought that Krishna was the only male there rest all were gopis. Second account is given by historian M. M. Gaurishankar Ojha who maintains that Mira went to Davarika after leaving Merta.

Mira's death is shrouded in mystery. There is no evidence of the date or place of her death. Priyadas says that in the course of time evils fell on the city of Chittor as it was occupied by Muslims more than once and finally destroyed in 1568 and the King of Mewar and Mira's other kinsmen began to think that it was due to the persecution of a great devotee. They implored Mira to return but she took retired to the temple of Ranchor to pray and her body melted physically into the image. Hermann Goetz has tried to trace her life after her disappearance from Dwarka, but he admits that his narration is based "merely on circumstantial evidence, not documentation". He is of the view that Mira went to North India, spent many years travelling from place to place. "The Ranas of Chittor had already forgotten her and hidebound traditionalists were relieved at her disappearance. No attempt was made to search for Mirabai." (Goetz 40) Mirabai was

not important for the political authority, religious leaders and social circles of the Rajputs. Parashuram Chatuvedi a scholar of Indian Mysticism wrote in a letter to Padmavati Shabnam, "During my trip to Udaipur (The capital city of Mewar Rajasthan), I came to know that there is little respect or regard for Mira in this town." (Shabnam 500) Munshi Devi Prasad dated the event to 1546 on the basis of the word of a court minstrel. However, there is no consensus regarding the date of death. V.K. Sethi in his book *Mira the Divine Lover* states that "Mira was not politically important. The royal families of Merta and Mewar continued to be indifferent to Mira till almost the beginning of the 20th century. According to the Bhurdan Bhat of village Lunve, Rajasthan, Mira died in 1546, he also adds that the place of her death is not known. Bhats of Ranimanga give the date as 1548, while others give it as 1547. The entries of Bhats cannot be treated as reliable, for they must have been made long after Mira's death when they thought her important enough to be mentioned in the records of royal families."(Sethi 27)

The dates, no matter how misleading they are, point towards one thing that she lived in the midst of great devotional renaissance:

The Bhakti Movement. If the consensus view of her life is taken into cognizance then Raidas, Kabir, Vidyapati, Chandidas and Narsi Mehta were her immediate forerunners and Surdas, Guru Nanak and early poets of the schools of Vallabha and Chaitanaya were her contemporaries.

Whatever point of view the chronological details of Mirabai may present, two things are very clear: That history is almost reticent about her existence and that oral tradition is overflowing with her presence. These two juxtaposing diverse standpoints make one thing clear that her demeanor must not have been in accordance with the socially accepted norms of the patriarchal set up; the rituals and customs of the religious order of the politically powerful and the politically correct patterns of behavior. She was ignored by the chroniclers of her times and given a kind of a deliberate push into the oblivion, but she was kept alive by millions in their reverence and love who sang songs of her and about her. This powerful woman saint though deliberately silenced in the chronicled history of the Rajputs broke all barriers and her voice of defiance reverberates through the centuries. The purpose of discussing the elusive details of her life and times is to

bring to the forefront the idea of deliberate marginalization by the authorities of her times and the resistance to such a marginalization by the oral tradition that kept her alive. The contriving corridors of history may not provide us with the details of her growth as a poet par excellence but the great memory of the tradition keeps her alive. Mira Bai corpus poses a major problem of authorship. On one hand we have Swami Ananda Savrup's "Mira Sudhasindhu" containing 1312 songs and on the other hand we have Hawleys claim that only 6 songs have been documented in the manuscripts. With a range as wide as 6-1312, it becomes a herculean task to reach any kind of conclusion regarding the original writing of the author. There are two types of poems, one that bears the mark of the author as her saying and the other that is about her. In his essay on Mirabai, Hawley uses a metaphor of a cone to describe the situation of the literature attributed to Mirabai.

"At the bottom end (on which everything else does not balance) we have the few poems attributed to Mira that can be found in reliably datable seventeenth-century manuscripts, with one or two at the bottom tip. Then we have the cone itself which gets

bulkier the farther up we go. In the nineteenth century it gets quite broad, apparently balanced on an oral tradition that has been accumulating all along. But the orality -the fact of textual invisibility- makes it almost impossible how full the cone is in its lower reaches.” (Hawley 102)

He makes an observation that only in manuscripts belonging to the latter half of the eighteenth century, two centuries after Mirabai is universally supposed to have lived, do we have any substantial reference to the poet princess of Rajasthan, even there the sampling is remarkably sparse, compared to her towering reputation in the present. It is on this premises of the vast range of the number of poems attributed to Mira that Hawley bases his argument about the Author and Authority. He argues that the saints held a kind of authority over certain ideas that were perpetuated in their names by the followers and the corpus kept on inflating from a measly six to one thousand three hundred and twelve. There are many repetitions, the same song is attributed to different saints, and whosoever was popular in whichever region got the signature of the song. In case of Mira as in case of other Bhakti saints as well, there are songs that

are recited about her life, and certain songs by her.

The writings attributed to Mira are numerous, the poetical form, is *Pad. Pads* are rhymed lyrical compositions of approximately six to eight lines in length, however, occasionally these can be much longer. The themes are primarily religious, as songs addressed to God or songs emphasizing the condition of the devotee; each pad bears a refrain and is intended to be sung. Pads have been composed in most of the major literary dialects that contribute to what can broadly be called the Hindi language family, including Brajhasa, Rajisthani and Sadhukkari Bhasa which is a mixed argot of “holy men” speech.

Hawley observes that, “One is not left to infer the names of authors of these pads on the basis of what they said. It is virtual requirement of the genre, and in this the pad is not alone, that the poet’s name appears in the last one or two lines as a sort of signature. But then the question confronts us: what do these signatures mean?”(22)

Hawley further argues that such signatures register something more rather something less than the name of a poem’s author. He distinguishes between the Western

understanding of the word author and the Indian context. He emphasizes that it is the authority that these pads register than the name of the author as a composer of these pads, which means that what is being rendered in the Pad is ideologically subservient to the name to which it is attributed but the composition may not be by the same person. Knowledge of the genre of Pad was shared between poet, performer and audience, and radically shared in their common singing of the poem's refrain.

Thus what comes to us in the twenty first century is a huge corpus of literature attributed to Mirabai. Giving an account of the range of poetry attributed to Mirabai, Krishna P. Bahadur states that "The collection of Dakor and Kashi has 103 and the Mira-Sudha-Sindhu has 1312. Various other anthologies with refrains of Mira ke prabhu girdhar nagar and Mira ke prabhu hari avinasi, have as many as 5,197 verses of which 3,797 are in Devanagari and 817 in Gujrati." (27)

Munshi Deviprasad has mentioned four works which he attributes to Mirabai. A commentary on Gita Govinda; Narasiji Mahara; a collection of verses believed to be hers and Ragasarotha-pada-samgraha. Of these the first, the commentary on Gita

Govinda, was written by Rana Khumba, not by Mira. The others are either not extant or do not appear to be hers, while the anthology comprises the works of many other poets as well. In his Hindi Sahitya Ka Itihasa, Acharya Ramchandra Shukla has ascribed a book called Raga-Govinda to Mira. (Hindi Sahitya Ka Itihasa, 184). Relying on the views of Ojha and K.N.Jhaveri, Acharya Parashurama Chaturvedi has attributed two works to Mirabai, namely Mirambai ka Malara and Garvagita or Miran ni Garbi, according to Brijratnadasa, but none of these works are in existence.

Bhagwandas Tiwari writes in his Miram ki Bhakti aur unki Kaya-Sadhna ka Anusalan that , there are some manuscripts in various libraries and societies which have a few pads bearing Mira's name. These are with the present noble of the palace of Jodhpur; the Purattatva Mandir, Jodhpur; Dholi Bavali, Udaipur; the Phambasa Gujrat Sabha, Mumbai; The Gujrat Vernacular Society, Ahmadabad, and at various other place. However, these do not have any of Mirabai's pads even though some bear her name. They appear to be the compositions of other saints and poets. (Bhagwandas, 29-39)

Acharya Chaturvedi considerably revised the fifteenth edition of the Padavali in 1973, on the basis of material published in the intervening years of his first publication and also on the basis of manuscript material provided to him by his friends. Acharya Chaturvedi's 1973 edition of Padavali contains 202 songs plus 18 songs that include the terminology of the Sant school, considered by him to be doubtful and placed in the Appendix.

Swami Ananda Svarup's Mira Sudha Sindhu contains 1312 songs, Padmavati Shabnam's Brihad Pada Sangrah contains 590. Sh. Chaturvedi's Padavali contains 202 songs. Not only is the number an issue, but the language of composition is also an impediment in determining the authenticity of authorship. The songs are in different dialects. It is quite probable that her songs must have been much tailored and altered by the singers who sang them. Dr. Padmavati states that in the documents available at the Lok Sahitya Vidyalaya Girinara, it is mentioned that Mira's verses have been handed down primarily through Bhils and other tribals.

According to Dr. Irach Jehangir Sorabji Taraporewala,

“Mira's songs have been current in three vernaculars-Hindi, Marwari and Gujrati. And during the centuries that have elapsed since her time, a great deal of mixing of dialects in her songs has come about. It is probable, however, that she herself, a Rajputani, used the mixture of these three dialects in her later years. But her very popularity in these vernaculars has made it extremely difficult to determine what is her own genuine work and what is later forgery.” (Taraporewala, 372)

However, Chaturvedi in his Padavali opines that on the whole, the linguistic forms that have come down in the Padavali seem to correspond with geographical data of Mira's life as reconstructed by modern scholarship. Her childhood and youth in Rajasthan would account for Rajasthani base. Her travels to Braj and Davarika and her mingling with other holy men would account for the sprinkling of other dialects.

“Mirabai's genius encouraged thousands of people in her time to compose ecstatic poems and to sing and dance to them. Many villages treasure the poems that she is said to have left behind in that town. Her poems are still being sung everywhere in India” says Robert Bly in his book on Mirabai.(vi)

Thus the Mira Bai corpus that reaches us is a tradition of a continual composition in the name of Mira Bai; in her voice is incorporated the voices of all those singers and composers who have kept her alive through the centuries. The hagiography, history and literature; all are intangible and at many places the creation of imagination of subsequent generations. The themes might also have been added or deleted as per the requirements of the times. Despite the possible modifications and transformations, the Mira Bai corpus comes to us as the bold voice of self assertion and dissent against the established patterns of power. The vast range of number of poems attributed to her and the great variety of vernacular languages that emerges from the songs attributed to Mira on one hand confuse the scholar about the authenticity of authorship and on the other hand confirm the astounding authority that Mira holds on enormous mass of literature attributed to her. Hawley has highlighted this authority aspect and freed the modern scholar from the clutches of doubt about the authenticity and authorship. The poems that have come down the centuries in the name of any particular poet saint are a proof enough about the popularity and the kind of authority that the saint had amongst the

masses. What is more fascinating is that, with the passage of time and decline in the power of those who deliberately kept Mirabai out of the annals of History, she gained greater popularity. History which was often at the behest of the powerful rulers has been belied by the subversive power held by the masses. Oral tradition has kept the persecuted queen alive through the poetry attributed to her. She might have reached us in an exaggerated form as many scholars would tell us, but the fact remains that Mira that we know today is the Mira brought to us by those who kept her alive, it is their version of Mira.

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