

## MIRABAI: "WHERE IS MY BELOVED?"

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### 1. Introduction: A Paradigm of Loving Devotion

The intuitions emerging from the concrete life experiences of the mystic are part of the heritage of humankind and might be considered seed material for a form of "spiritual genetics." When the well-developed mystic consciousness is present, nothing else matters more than the compulsion to nourish the divine spark within, until it bursts into an all-consuming fire. In the process, the mystic gives up whatever is not God. Energy normally expended in maintaining the fragile ego-stability is now released and available for ever-widening circles of joy, compassion and loving service. This, in many cases, may be misunderstood by others and the mystic often has to stand all alone. The mystic is one who really knows, one who is really at home in the universe. Who can be more important to the whole human race than those who remind us of who we really are?

Mirabai is a woman who is loved as a saint and mystic all over India. She has left behind powerful expressions of her mystical experience and message of love in the many poems attributed to her. Her life is a message and her struggles to be herself are carried on in the struggles of thousands of Indian women who fight for survival, for self-expression and autonomy. Mirabai inspires us because she upholds community, especially among the lost and the least who find an identity through communion and solidarity. The legacy of mystical experience left behind her by Mira is the common property of the human race today. All the castes and outcastes (like herself), both men and women, can lay claim on her experience, and the world is in dire need of the same, especially in the present times, as we are torn apart by a lot of violence perpetrated in the name of religion. She tells

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that Indian women, confined to the four walls of religious *dharma*, can become free if only we were aware how much the divine is in love with us and how powerful the spark of this love that is placed within each of us could become, when we tend it with care.

## 2. A Short Sketch of Mira's Life

In the cult of Kṛṣṇa, we see that the worship of Kṛṣṇa the warrior and counsellor of *Gīta* slowly gives way to worship of Kṛṣṇa as a charming cowherd boy who steals the hearts of many in the later centuries. The creative impulse of *bhakti*, developed in South India by the Ālvārs get connected to the North Indian traditions through the *āchāryas* of Sri Sampradāya, especially Rāmānuja.<sup>1</sup> According to the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, 'Giridhar Nagar' whom Mira celebrates through her *bhajans* is another name for Kṛṣṇa who is believed to have playfully uprooted a mountain to provide shelter for his friends, the pastoral people of Braj, when heavy rains due to the wrath of Indra, the rain god, threatened them.<sup>2</sup>

### A. Childhood

Mirabai is known the world over as the young woman who devoted her life to the worship of Lord Kṛṣṇa. She composed songs and poems in praise of her lord and danced with abandon to glorify his name.

Born towards the end of the fifteenth century, within the Rathor Rajput family of Merta in present day Rajasthan, Mira was a princess. Historical facts get mingled with hagiography in the telling of her story. Her devotion to Kṛṣṇa is traced back to an event from the legends. As a child Mira was with her grandmother looking out from the palace. Suddenly, a marriage procession was passing by. Mira was impressed by the royalty of the man on the horseback. She enquired who that man was. When she was told that it was the bridegroom going to claim his bride, Mira asked if every girl had a bridegroom and if yes, where is hers? The desperate Grandmother seems to have pointed to the 'Giridhar Gopal'

<sup>1</sup>A. J. Alston, *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980, 16-17.

<sup>2</sup>*Bhāgavata Purāna* 1.18.1, in Parita Mukta, *Upholding Common Life: The Community of Mirabai*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, 33, 121.

statue of Kṛṣṇa and told that he was her bridegroom. This seems to have been her initiation into Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*.

### B. Married Life

The custom of Mira's people in those centuries was to arrange marriages with the purpose of military allegiance. A marriage was arranged between Mira and the *yuvraj* (heir apparent) of the throne of Chittor cementing the political allegiance of the Rathors of Merta and the Siṣodiyas of Chittor. Mira mentions later in her poems that she was sold in the marriage market. Mira, however, rejected the rank and title of wife to the prince of Chittor, declaring that her love and allegiance lay with Kṛṣṇa and refused to consummate the relationship. She considered herself married to Kṛṣṇa, god and king of Dwaraka.

Young Mira would go to the Kṛṣṇa temple at some distance from the palace very often, be it day or night. She would sing and dance in public singing the praises of her Kṛṣṇa. Rajput men guarded their women under strict *purdah* taking pride in their modesty. The Siṣodiyas of Chittor, rulers of a mighty and warring state, felt shamed by Mira's public defiance of their power by mingling freely with holy men and they bore her a cruel enmity all her life. Mira, on the other hand, believed strongly that in God's scheme of life there is no barrier of sex, caste and creed. She associated freely with others who shared her love and devotion for Kṛṣṇa. This angered her in-laws. Many attempts were made on her life, though, at all times, Giridhar, her "mountain bearing" beloved (another name for Kṛṣṇa), had miraculously saved her.

### C. Wandering Life

At a young age, Mira's husband and father-in-law (Rana Sangha) died in battle. Mira refused to commit *sati*, as was the practice among Rajputs. As, by conviction, she was wedded to Giridhar Gopal, she considered herself a '*suhagan*' (married) forever. The death of her "earthly" husband had no meaning to her. However, she realized that her life was now in greater danger. She then embraced the life of an itinerant singer, growing deeper day by day in her love for Kṛṣṇa. She gave up completely her rank and attire that marked her out as a woman of social standing and took on the

clothing of a mendicant. In many of her pictures, she is seen with an *ektara* in her hand, singing and dancing in front of a Kṛṣṇa statue. The songs of her heart came out as some of the best lyrics of India to this day. Indeed, her *bhajans* are very popular. Her songs, added to over the years by those who love and believe in her, continue to be sung today.

News about the God intoxicated princess spread all around. The poor people understood the struggles she had gone through. Mira's followers came from all walks of life and together they formed an alternate community. Breaking all barriers of sex, class and creed she lived amongst them, thereby incurring the wrath of her people who preferred not to know her. Some went to the extent of disowning her. Despite the resistance to her and her way of life from her own family members, "people's Mira" comes alive even today through the singing of her *bhajans* by those struggling to make ends meet, especially the Dalits in different parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Often, a *jagran* (an all night vigil during which only *bhajans* are sung) cannot commence without a prelude from *Mira ka bhajan* (a song of Mira).

#### D. Union with the Lord

The legend continues that when Mira was wandering away from her hometown, great misfortunes, military defeat, severe drought and poverty occurred. When the Siṣodiya ruler saw that people's pressure was building up, he sent two emissaries to the Dwāraka temple to ensure that Mira returned to Chittor, his state capital. Mira, however, refused. The two emissaries then staged a *dharna*, attempting to exert pressure on Mira to return. Mira then replied that she would seek Kṛṣṇa's advice as to what she should do. She went inside and was absorbed into the statue of Ranchodji. All that remained, draped across the feet of the deity, were Mira's robe and her hair. Mira is believed to have lived around fifty years by most people who retell her story. There have been poetesses of a high order and also God-intoxicated saints and mystics amongst women, but the combination of the two in one person, and that too, a lady of royal household as Mira, has few parallels in the world history.

### 3. *Bhakt* Mira: "Where is My Beloved?"

The whole life of Mira is based on loving devotion to Kṛṣṇa. Baldoon Dhingra is of the opinion that among the mystical poets of India, in grace, melody and simplicity, she has few equals.<sup>3</sup> Mira appeals to a wide variety of people. Her songs have been preserved in Gujarati and Hindi and are sung by all kinds of people: in the streets, on festive occasions, at religious fetes, in temples, by saints and sages all over the land, on the radio and in films. Mira's *bhajans* or hymns have a magical quality all their own.

Mira directs her songs to Kṛṣṇa, the God who was also a man, who lived among the cowherds, loving Rādhā and other peasant girls who tended their cows in the village, and playing to them on his flute. In her poems Mira herself becomes one of the girls during the time of Kṛṣṇa's youthful days. Mira's poetry records a sense of surrender not easily available among other serious poets. Mira's poetry reveals her love for Kṛṣṇa as a spouse. As she had become a widow in her real life, such an open admiration for Kṛṣṇa as a lover was anti-establishment, non-conformist and, thus, anathema. She, however, cared neither for criticism, nor for persecution both of which she faced ungrudgingly.

Mira's devotion springs from her personal feeling of nearness to Kṛṣṇa. But at times the lover goes out of sight and away from the beloved. So she expresses the pangs of separation in many of her poems, though it is hope, and not despair, that is writ large in her poetry. Her poems contain a tinge of sadness and suffering. They also contain the single-minded devotion and submission to Kṛṣṇa. Metaphorically, a person's relationship with God is eternal, and whatever the circumstances, the tie is never broken. Mirabai's poetry is not only a remembrance, but also a celebration of that relationship.

Some or all of the following elements usually found in love lyrics in India and elsewhere are included in her poems: initial stirrings of love, greening of nature in spring time, her frailty and tenderness contrasted with Kṛṣṇa's strength and robust nature, the inescapable nature of agony and ecstasy in their love relationship, the emotional torrent of being

<sup>3</sup>Baldoon Dhingra, *Songs of Meera: Lyrics in Ecstasy*, New Delhi: Orient Paperback, 1977, 14.

separated from one's beloved, the eternal nature of their love and the excruciating pain in waiting for the lover's return are all found in her poems. She uses varieties of rich imageries to paint various aspects of her relationship with Kṛṣṇa, finally reaching some indescribably elemental point in each of her songs. She speaks like a lover who is reduced to wreckage from the passions felt. That she reached such a sublime condition, and sustained in it for years, without eliminating her human intelligence, makes her songs so explosive.

She condemns injustice, pride, and power. She has concern for the downtrodden. Mira's rebelliousness, her swift condemnation of injustice towards women, her mocking attitude towards institutionalized religion, etc., brought notoriety to her. However, her main concern was love, the incessant search for her beloved and the desire to be united with him. In such a most fundamental existential quest, she identifies with every song of birds, every hum of bees or crickets and every created being that searches for its beloved.

Mira is driven mad by her longing for Kṛṣṇa – in the songs that's how she puts it – thus over-stepping the traditional understanding of modesty in taking up a drum to sing her madness aloud to the world. To herself she applies the word *bāvrī* (etymologically the same word as *Baul*, taken up by noted crazy wisdom singers of Bengal several centuries later).<sup>4</sup> This is the madness of the *prēm-bhakti mārḡ*, the path of romance and worship, which she calls devious (*nyāro*).<sup>5</sup> Her *bhakti mārḡa* is a wild path, a pathless path to salvation, and it seems that the farther you travel it, the more hopeless your situation, the more pointed the anguish, the deeper one's desolation.

What survive of Mirabai today are her passion, art and the poetry. Gifted musicians like Dilip Kumar Roy, Juthika Ray, Pandit Omkarnath, Subbalakshmi and Lata Mangeshkar have set to exquisite music some of the famous *bhajans* of Mira and honoured them by lending them their voice, enhancing their popularity and longevity for times to come.

She was a *bhaktātma*. She had belief in rebirth. She considers herself the Rādha of *Kaliyuga* who wants to fulfil the unfulfilled desires of the Rādha of *Dwāparayuga*. The first Rādha could not go out of the Vraj.

<sup>4</sup>Dhingra, *Songs of Meera*, 56.

<sup>5</sup>Alston, *The Devotional Poems*, 46f. (Poems 29 and 31).

Mira, however, could go out and she walked the paths trod by Kṛṣṇa and reached Dwāraka before her death. "Leaving all" is one of her themes. To attain Kṛṣṇa who is her *all*, she leaves everything else.

The essence of Mira's poetry is the longing for the eternal Lord. The human experience or the inner longing for that which satisfies completely is the point of departure in many of her poems. The goal of her poetic *sādhana* is union with Mohan, her Lord. The core of Mira's life was Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. She was a unique poet who highlights for us a woman's experience of the divine. She was a philosopher and a musician in her own right. The voice and inner longings of her womanly heart are mirrored in every word of her poetry.

Inspirational and devotional poetry was the order of the day and music was seen as one of the key elements of worship. Mira was very gifted in this area and natural rhythms spontaneously flowed out of her as *bhajans* and *kīrtans*. She celebrated her experience of Kṛṣṇa by articulating through the medium of songs. Sometimes she spontaneously expressed herself in songs and dances. "Mira's songs simply survived in the mouths of itinerant singers who learned them, sang them, sometimes altered them and added to them, and passed them on."<sup>6</sup> Her poems were repeated by wandering ascetics and musicians. It is common knowledge that her songs have been much tailored and altered by the singers who sang them.<sup>7</sup> The signature Mira usually uses is "*Mīrari prabhu Giridāhar Nāgār*," as in the following ending to one of Mira's songs:

O my companion, all I can see is Shyām,  
 All I can think of is Shyām.  
 Wherever my feet tread the earth  
 I am dancing in his honour.  
 Mira's Lord is the courtly Giridhara:  
 In His company  
 She is walking the woods and lanes.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Alston, *The Devotional Poems*, 28.

<sup>7</sup>Alston, *The Devotional Poems*, 28.

<sup>8</sup>Alston, *The Devotional Poems*, 41 (Poem 21).



Though rich in imageries her *padas* are not flights of fancy, but factual words of her poetry speak of their "eye-witness" nature:

O Giridhara Lāl, You enjoyed a feast.  
 Servant Mira begged a boon,  
 And my dear Kṛṣṇa showed His compassion.  
 He who protects and nourishes His servants  
 Accepted a savoury dish.  
 I held the platter before Him  
 While Giridhara feasted royally.  
 Servant Mira will take refuge with Thee,  
 Grant her contentment soon.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in her poetry, an inexhaustible longing for Mira's Giridhara and the unmistakable accent of her total surrender are given sublime expression through a variety of metaphors drawn from the symbols and legends of her people. The verses flow effortlessly, studded with rich images from the sights, sounds and experiences of daily living: mountains, rivers, trees, birds, flowers, clothes, jewels and the like. Mira's poetry is the symbol of her inner world. The thoughts, feelings and aspirations we find in her poems allow the listeners to be transported with her to the ocean of the Kṛṣṇa's love. Her poetry comes from the heart and there is a conspicuous absence of intellectualism.

Mira speaks of being coloured by the Lord's complexion. Her God is the most charming Mōhan. She says that the world is unreal, meaning thereby that God alone is wholly real. All other experiences are sustained on and by that substratum.

The cataka bird (Indian Cuckoo) is fabled to drink only that water which is fallen when the moon is in the constellation of Svāti and to spurn all other water. The bird is believed to be in love with the rain cloud.<sup>10</sup> The rain cloud is a welcome sign and is long awaited both by the farmers and the earth. The bird's natural call is taken to be a repetition of the word 'pivā', which means 'beloved' or 'darling', as she awaits faithfully for her 'lover', the rain cloud that appears to be filled with expectations and anticipation of rain. Traditionally, the rainy season is expected as the time

<sup>9</sup>Alston, *The Devotional Poems*, 53 (Poem 47).

<sup>10</sup>Alston, *The Devotional Poems*, 128.



when the beloved is at home. The cloud, the cuckoo and season of monsoon are expectant times in Indian literature especially in the love lyrics. Waiting in expectation and with excitement is the attitude of the season. From the start, the rainy season is the season of love in India's love poetry. Add to it the peacock's shrill scream, the far off clashing of thunder, a fragrance of blossoms stirred and then torn by the wind, and the haunting song of the Indian Cuckoo, making the scene one of divine love studded with the colours of devotional romance. With these Mira sets out her scene. The peacock is believed to begin its elaborate mating dance to attract its beloved when the thick rain clouds appear in the horizon. Mira takes imageries from the natural scene before describing her friend and God who also is fond of dance and music. Kṛṣṇa dances with *gopis* and plays his flute. She joins in the quest of nature and asks: "where is my beloved?"

#### 4. Liberative Perspective of Mira's Gospel

Mira's sufferings did not make her a bitter person. Her life blossomed through various struggles and she lived and celebrated life very creatively. She expressed herself in songs and dance and by the simple life of a wanderer – unheard of for a woman at that time. She claimed to be the one evolved of her God. She loved much and is loved much to this day. She still stirs the depths within the hearts of many and induces hope in their lives.

Although religion becomes a means for women to negotiate entry into hitherto restricted political domains beyond the confines of the household, the empowerment of women determined by religion continues nevertheless, to be constrained by patriarchal interests. What feminism needs today is to recognize the inadequacies and inequalities of our Indian tradition without being interpreted as anti-Indian in culture and outlook.

Within the parameters of any religion, male power structures and male God-figures are at best only half the ideas that God had for the management of the human race. In a mostly male, highly militarist and caste-ridden society, Mira stands out as an icon of community, freedom, courage and humility. Her *bhakti* is counter-cultural: Mira rejects Rana as husband; she refuses absolutely to accept the status of a widow by not undergoing *sati*. Mira pays no respect to the political and moral authority

of the Rana. Eliminating the caste sensibilities and gender related decorum she dances before the *sādhus* and saints. In her poetic narratives authority is distributed and the weak are empowered. Her God Kṛṣṇa, *Giridhar Gopal*, is one who does the same. He listens to the cry of those in distress; He upholds a whole mountain and saves people. Thus, she stood amidst a decaying Rajput society though refused to decay with it. She took the companionship of her God seriously and walked with him.

Every one of the stories of Kṛṣṇa Mira alludes to in her poems has to do with care for another, and not mystical experiences, esoteric visions or transcendent ecstasies. It is always a human condition that captures Kṛṣṇa's concern; it is always the human need on which he concentrates his Divine strength. To Mira, spiritual life is not a way to escape the vagaries of living. She puts the pursuit of God at the centre of her life. She shows through her own life that God, not custom, no matter how revered, must really be the criterion upon which we base our life and decisions. Her poems are fanciful to our post-modern ears, but they are logical to the heart. Mira stands out in history not because of a life of her own but because of what her life did for the lives of many who followed her singing the *bhajans* she left behind. She is a witness to the burning magnetism of the presence of God in every human soul that demands the best from each of us. She is showing us the way to a God who said, "loose yourself in me and you will find new life" (Jn. 12:12).

### A. Forming an Alternate Community

*Satsaṅg* is an experience from which she gained much courage and strength. She was open and hospitable to many saints who came by. Though she did not join any *sampradāy*, or found any new ones, she listened respectfully and made her unique mark on many a *sampradāy*. She had a unique devotional life and she stands alone among the poet saints of Middle Ages.

Mira spurned not only the might and the privileges of the Rana, but she spurned the norms of conduct and decorum entailed in being a member of the royal family. She cut off the cord that tied her to the family relations and to the worldly affairs. The rules, which governed her as a woman and as a member of the Rajput caste, ceased then to hold any meaning to her. The community of Mirabai is essentially the community of *bhajniks* who,

over the centuries, have provided a voice to the struggle for dignity and hope for a better life. This community includes within it the community of all sufferers. The *bhajniks*, through their *bhajans*, affirm a community in open antagonism to the ruling one, and within which lies the seeds of a new social order.<sup>11</sup> Their *bhajans* positively display the tension that involved in Mira rejecting her social ties and her attempts in creating alternate ones. Even while she was in the palace she began to dance with the *sādhus* and *sants*. Crucial within this affinity, which forms the main emotional force to the people talking to Mira, is the suffering and humiliation Mira endured in forging the links to the common life.

Mira *bhajans* are sung in the evenings, after a day's labour, by poor peasants or by migrant workers who occupy the lowest rung in the urban economy, by people who are gathered together to share in unburdening of toil. Mira is linked to the Dalit communities of Mewar, Marwar and Saurashtra, and they declare an affiliation to her today.<sup>12</sup>

All those who are shut out of a privileged existence come together, sing and participate in a common life which is held in contempt by others, though it is upheld as one which brings them all together in a common framework of reference.

It is in the context of the lives of poor people who are bound to each other by bonds of mutual co-operation that the Mira *bhakti* must be understood. The articulation of the Mira *bhakti* takes place precisely in the domain where the relations of co-operation and community exist. In this articulation, Mira does not emerge as a lone, isolated voice, but as the voice of the community gathered around, which is not just confined to one's immediate caste community. The community embraced through the *bhajans* stretches beyond the confines of the gathering, to take in all those who are known to share a common life of labour, deprivation and suffering.

The tie forged between Mira and the people was forged through a sharing of a common suffering and a common humiliation. The *bhajans* reflect an acute intensity, which is marked not by values of aesthetic enjoyment or musical appreciation, but by a jagged and unfulfilled

<sup>11</sup>Mukta, *Upholding Common Life*, 105.

<sup>12</sup>Mukta, *Upholding Common Life*, 109.

promise of a dignity denied in everyday social relations.<sup>13</sup> It is those who endure daily social humiliation who understand what Mira went through in her discarding of riches and leading a life of poverty. This is held up and painfully exposed in her compositions. This is the central force and the central thrust of the Mira *bhakti*.

### B. Mira's Gift to Women

Mira invites today's women to move on to new horizons; from the limits of our formal religion to the human culture as a whole. Mira is inviting women to move away from patriarchal control to the horizons of creative freedom. Her life invites us today to leave the boundaries of logic to the horizon of paradoxes and the counter cultural which provide a dynamic impetus to human existence. She is asking us to face squarely our fear of innovation, creativity, and power of imagination. She invites us to transcend the boundary of laws to the horizons of love. What authenticates a life of devotion more than anything else is the willingness to risk everything in the process of following God. This willingness to risk and squander everything as a woman for the sake of love, justice and inner search is what we see in her life. In our spiritual quest Mira teaches us that perfection is not achieved in reaching the end of the road, but in being part of the ongoing pilgrimage wholeheartedly.

Mira carved out a path for personal freedom for women. It was not done without a struggle, and it was not achieved without facing repression. The *bhajans* point to an area of life, which leaves one free to conduct one's unfulfilled aspirations: this is the arena of imagination, the world of a dynamic mind and a creative spirit.

It is Mira's relationship to poverty, and to the living of an ordinary common life that *bhajans* uphold today, for the people see in the actions of Mira her affinity with them. The stark indicators of poverty and of the common condition, which are evoked in the singing of the *bhajans*, describe a historical badge of subordination and solidarity between all those who have experienced it. In the Mira *bhakti*, the tension and the power of these values are provided by the fact that Mira had to fight hard to retain her affiliation to a life of simplicity.

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<sup>13</sup>Mukta, *Upholding Common Life*, 104.

Thus Mira who loved tenderly, acted justly, and walked humbly, surrendering everything in the company of her beloved lord, Kṛṣṇa becomes an inspiration and exemplar for religious women in India who are called to be with their Lord through their vows lived in communities for mission.

### C. The Power of Protest

People influence people; in fact, people have grave responsibility for one another. Mira learned how to learn from the holiness of another and then turned that learning into wisdom for others. Mira does not emerge merely as a lone *bhakta*, an isolated creator of verses, or a renouncer, but as living within and contributing to the formation of a community in solidarity moved by her love and commitment to her lord Kṛṣṇa.

It is one thing to have insight; and it is another thing to have power. To bring power to insight is entirely a third one. Mira had all the three. There are three main strands, which emerge out of life, work and the community of Mirabai: (1) the attack on Rajput political authority, (2) the defiance of patriarchal norms of marriage (she spurned the power of the ruler and husband over her and refused to grant him her allegiance. She declared that she would serve no one else but Kṛṣṇa) and (3) the attack on the caste system.

#### i. Attack on Rajput Political Authority

Mira's challenge to Rajput dharma lay not simply in her enunciation of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, but in the stand that she adopted in the pursuance of her love for Kṛṣṇa. She posited the power of her relationship with Kṛṣṇa against her relationship to Rana, her lord and husband. This earthly master meant nothing to her. She even refused to consummate the relationship. At his death, she refused to immolate herself with him (i.e., to practise *sati*), declaring that the tie with her beloved was an immortal one, and that she did not accept the status of a widow. Mira accepted the supremacy and mediation of none save Kṛṣṇa. At a time when the ruling family was consolidating its political power, Mira's challenge marked the impotence of Rana to elicit devotion from a woman that his self-image was so intrinsically linked to.

Mira brought into question the authority of a prince, a husband a patriarch, that too all at the same time. If she had upheld her love for Kṛṣṇa quietly in her heart, or within the precincts of temple and personal worship, this would have been tolerated. What was not tolerated was her public affirmation of this. Even before she left the fortress of Chittor, she is said to have kept company with itinerant *bhaktas* and have danced and sung in their company. Mira, thus, did not keep to the code of conduct expected of a woman from a Rajput ruling family.

It is precisely this antagonism, the conflict between the demands of a warring state power and the dictates of one's heart that lies central to the Mira *bhakti*. It is this conflict that resonates in her *bhajans*. Her breaking of loyalty then resonated with those who were down by the power of Rana. Mira broke the loyalty to *kul* (class), to prince and husband and created a new life based on love.

## ii. Defiance of Patriarchal Norms of Marriage

It is so easy to think that the world is in the hands of those who think they control it with political power. At every turn, however, are those who transcend the system and who, by their very distance from it, show it up for what it is. It is the poor of our society who show us the fibre of our society. It is the outcastes of a people who show us the real mettle of the society. It is the underclass of a society that is the measure of its upper class.

In a highly structured, hierarchical, caste-based society, the institution of marriage consolidates and continues caste and community ties. It is not a question of individual choice. Yet, Mira enunciated a choice for herself; it is as if she made a choice even when the situation provided none.

*Bhakti* enabled Mira to uphold a life based on love. *Bhakti* enabled her to establish a relationship which was of her choosing and which was self-directive. In fact, the power to express and bestow a love was her own choice. Kṛṣṇa worship was a powerful force. Kṛṣṇa appeared in various forms and was worshipped in multifarious ways. Mira's Kṛṣṇa symbolized divine love, the guiding principle in her life in the society, which largely upheld the counter values of Kṛṣṇa ideal.

Mira stands out as a woman who threw aside the particular marriage institution that makes a woman enter into an intimate relationship with a man she does not have an affinity with. The articulation of Mira *bhajans* upholds a common experience faced by all women, a common harsh imposition and a common lack of personal freedom. All those who have endured incompatible relationships, all those who have suffered the violence of a forced intimacy, and all those women who have dreamt and continue to dream of relationships in which minds do not remain poles apart and the spirits do not fly out of their homes will find solace in the freedom Mira had experienced.

The experience of being a widow – be it of any class or community – is a deeply scarring one. Thus, when Mira *bhajans* articulate the pain of this experience, it enters into and validates a negation of the common degradation experienced by women. The song of Mira exists outside of formal *saṁpradāyas*. Indeed, her songs are kept alive and remain enfolded within the lives of the people.

For the suffering women of India, the prospect of liberation is bleak. A yearning after an imagined love within the walled existence of domesticity produces disenchantment and discontent. It does not fulfil; it does not break the walls; it can only enlarge these walls slightly. Seeking comfort in a relationship that is permanent by nature of its very indissolubility provides strength in a harsh and emotionally lonely existence. *Bhakti* provides sustenance to the soul to rise above drudgery, and by holding the image of the Beloved close to one can stop the wells of the heart from drying up.

### iii. Attack on the Caste System

Any unbiased onlooker knows that the system does not only have minor problems but is a major problem in itself. The prophet proclaims that the system is not God's plan, and that God is on the side of the oppressed, of those whom the system grinds up and presses down. The prophet's contemplative immersion in God results in a new vision derived not from the status quo but from God's promises, in new images that would energize alternative structures and strategies, in new languages and paradigms. This is what happened in the case of Mira and the communities formed around her story to this day.



For the poor and marginalized, it is not the temporal sequence but the spatiality that is of primary importance. Therefore, from a temporal perspective their narratives may appear as fragments, but in reality it is that space, which holds together their stories. Mira is honoured with this spatiality in the oral tradition of *bhajniks* belonging to the poor peasants and working class and their *bhajan* singing. Mira is held in high esteem within the artisan class, among the leather workers, weavers and at the bottom, the sweepers. In their singing of her *bhajans*, the theme of subverting and overthrowing the socially dominant norms of pollution and untouchability is very common.<sup>14</sup> Within each articulation through *bhajans*, these three strands coexist. Mira's suffering under the rule of Rana is acknowledged; Mira the mendicant, Mira the exile is in all the *bhajans* today. Mira's life of struggle gives the special character to the community of Mirabai.

### 5. Conclusion: A Subaltern Spirituality of Liberation

The life of Mira vividly illustrates that God will not be controlled, that God will rise in whom God wills, that God is not amenable to human limitations. She is God's proof that God has plans for all of us and that he will not bow to the chains of those who have no plans for us at all. Mira's life deals with the meaning of human love and the reality of union with God. She touched the world with the wand of love. She was a poet mystic, a mystic poet and a saint, who both unmasked God experience for herself and her contemporaries and provided one for the generations to come. She saw the stuff of human life as the raw material of the divine in each of us.

She exemplifies the untiring search for the Beloved that is the lot of every restless soul seeking a higher and sublime aim in life. Poet and mystic, filled with an overwhelming sense of the presence of God, she dances to the music of divine love to reach the state of *ekāgrata*, the heightened consciousness of one-pointedness in Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, that made instruction palatable and mystical encounter with God possible. Her poems are about experiencing God and they are designed to lure pedestrian souls – common folks – one step more beyond the mundane. Her poems lend depth to the obvious in life and give light to what is too often obscure. Her poetry made the human condition a holy one and contributed a corpus of

<sup>14</sup>Mukta, *Upholding Common Life*, 105.

religious wisdom that far surpassed the understandings and teachings of the structures and institution of the time.

Mira is a poignant voice from the 16<sup>th</sup> century about love and life, leading ultimately to union with God. She touches the nerve ends of our lives. She keeps us in touch with the spiritual in each of us in this age of information technology. She never stops insisting that the human is the ground of the divine. She is an eye into the human spirit. She is equally the prophetic voice as well as the music of love that can never quieten within us. She is the dancing disciple in each of us who lets us to pursue the highest love of life with wild abandon. She is a medieval *bhakta*, through she is more than that. She teaches us how to accept victory without yielding to its conquest. She is proof that within each of us lies a vision of reality, a reason for dancing and an understanding of life that supersede whatever tries to trap us in the mundane and holds us in the particular and drown us in the trivial. She is an evocative symbol for all women for the liberating possibility in an oppressive and limiting world of the present.