

Lecture 10: Saints of India (15th and 16th Century)

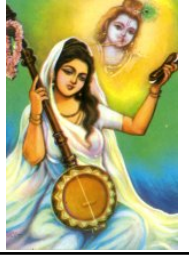
December 11, 2008

- Tulasidas, Kabir, Surdas – *Om Pathak*
- Mirabai – *Nimisha Bhatt*

Mirabai

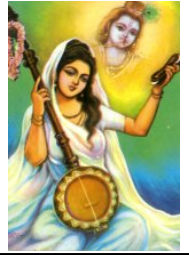
Nimisha Bhatt

Outline



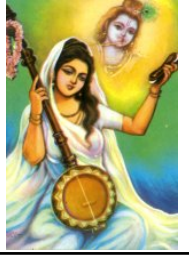
- Historical Context
- Life Story
 - Early Life
 - Marriage
 - Akbar Encounter
 - Family Conflict
 - Travels
 - Death
- Poetry
- Impact on Society

Historical Context



- Circa 1498-1547 CE
- Life vs. Legend
- Perhaps the most famous woman in Indian history. Versions of her songs are sung today all over India, and she appears as a subject in films, books, dances, plays and paintings.
- Mirabai is widely regarded as a “saint” in the tradition of the Bhakti Movement.
- Woman ahead of her time – broke social, caste and gender barriers

Early Life



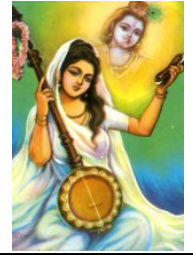
- 1498 - Born in Kudki, near Merta, Rajasthan
- Royal Rajput Family; Father: Ratan Singh, descendant of Rao Rathor, the founder of Jodhpur.
- Formative events:
 - 3 yrs old – enamored with Krishna doll
 - Wedding procession – my husband “Krishna”
- Mother died young; father preoccupied with war; raised by grandparents

Marriage



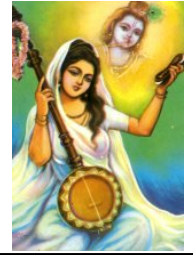
- 1516 – At age 18, married Prince Bhoj Raj of Rajput kingdom of Mewar, the most powerful Rajput state in the early 16th century; significantly elevated her social position
- Not a “dutiful” wife - refused to accept Prince as her husband (had already committed herself to Krishna), refused to worship the family deity
- Rejected luxuries of palace and spent her time in devotion and singing to her beloved Sri Krishna. She sang and danced in public temples and mingled with members of all castes frequently losing awareness of the world and entering into states of ecstasy and trance. She spent time discussing spiritual issues with sadhus and people would join in singing her bhajans.
- Family disapproved of her actions; sister-in-law spread false gossip about Mirabai, claiming Mira was unfaithful – resulting in life of great hardship. Her husband investigated and saw Mira only playing with a Krishna doll.

Akbar Encounter



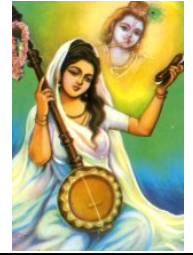
- Her fame and saintly reputation spread throughout the region, reaching the ears of the Moghul Emperor Akbar, who was interested in different religious paths.
- Akbar was determined to see Mirabai, the Princess Saint. However, he and Mirabai's family were the worst enemies. Visiting Mirabai would cause problems for both Akbar and Mirabai, so he travelled to visit Mirabai disguised as a beggar. He was so enamoured of her soulful music and devotional singing that before leaving, he placed a priceless necklace at her feet. Unfortunately, the necklace revealed his identity to Mirabai's husband, who was furious that a Muslim and his own arch-enemy had seen his wife.
- Soon after, 5 years after getting married, husband died in battle (1521).

Family Conflict & Escaping Death



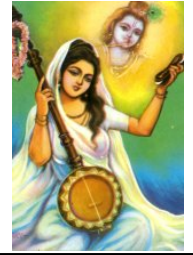
- Her husband's family saw his death as a way to be rid of Mirabai. When she refused to commit *sati* - multiple attempts were made on her life.
- Stories of Mirabai escaping death include:
 - Mirabai was sent a basket of flowers with a poisonous snake hidden inside. When she took the basket and looked inside, the snake turned into a religious figurine.
 - Her husband's family demanded that she drink a cup of poison in front of them as retribution for disrespecting her dead husband by refusing to commit *sati* as Rajput princesses were supposed to. Mirabai drank the poison, but remained unharmed.
 - When asked by her late husband's family to drown herself, Mirabai attempted to do so, but her body floated and did not sink.
 - Mirabai was forced to lie on a bed of nails, but arose unharmed.
- Each of these miraculous escapes were attributed to the intervention of Krishna and are believed to be Mirabai's reward for her undying devotion.
- In the face of all these trials and tribulations, she remained detached from her physical suffering and committed to Krishna.

Travels



- Around 1527, Mirabai tired of her family's relentless torments which interfered with her life of devotion to Krishna, and began a period of wandering which would take her throughout the subcontinent. This was highly unusual for a woman, and she often met with criticism.
- Returned to her childhood home of Merta
 - Father had died in battle against the Mughal emperor Babur
 - Faced more persecution, from uncle (King) who objected to her public displays of religious ardor
- Fled Merta and traveled to Vrindavan (the birthplace of Krishna)
 - Joined a religious community and was free to worship Krishna to her heart's content. She spent her time singing bhajans and worshipping Krishna. She considered herself to be a *gopi* of Vrindavan, mad with love for Krishna.
 - Learned sadhus would come to her for inspiration. One respected sadhu, Rupa Goswami, refused to speak to Mirabai because she was a woman. Mirabai replied there was only one real man in Vrindavan, Krishna; everyone else was a *gopi* of Krishna. The sadhu accepted the wisdom of Mirabai and agreed to talk to her. Later Mirabai would become his student.

Death



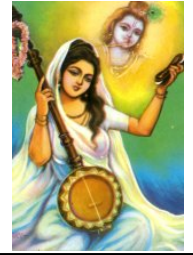
- Mirabai finally moved to Dwarka - another place with deep connections to Krishna.
- At this point, she had gained widespread fame as a *bhakt* (to her in-laws dismay).
- Mirabai's love for Krishna is epitomized by the popular belief about her final disappearance in the temple of Krishna in Dwarka in 1547.
 - Her husband's family sent a group to bring her back to Rajasthan.
 - Mirabai was in the Krishna temple and is believed to have entered the sanctum of the temple in a state of singing ecstasy.
 - The sanctum doors are believed to have closed on their own and when later opened, the sari of Mirabai was seen enwrapped around the idol of lord Krishna, symbolizing the culmination of her union with her lord.
 - It is believed that Krishna allowed Mirabai to merge with him completely, and she became one with him, never to be seen again.

Poetry



- ❑ Mirabai belongs to the Saguna class of worshippers of Brahman
- ❑ Integral part of Bhakti movement - active devotion displayed and expressed through public, ecstatic, religious song and dance.
- ❑ Poetry (bhajans) were composed in a combination of the Rajasthani and Vraj Bhasha languages, and translated into Hindi, Rajasthani, and Gujarati.
- ❑ 200 to 1,300 poems (*bhajans*) are attributed to Mirabai
- ❑ Mirabai poem is traditionally called a *pada*, a term used by 14th century preachers for a small spiritual song. Usually composed in simple rhythms and carries a refrain within itself.
- ❑ She is credited with creating a unique *raga* in which her songs were to be sung – Mira's *Malar*.
- ❑ Content of poems – variations of her love for her god, Krishna.
 - Mirabai looked upon Krishna as her husband, lover, lord and master. Her songs were filled with sensuous images and expressions of intense longing for spiritual and physical union with him.
 - Mirabai's songs portray a personal universe where the only existence was that of Krishna - her sole object of desire. Her poetry puts love for Krishna above the love for friends and family.
 - The unique characteristic of Mirabai's poetry is the use of complete surrender to her love for Krishna.
 - Majority of poems are addressed to Krishna as if from a wife to her husband, unlike traditional Bhakti movement poems, which were from the perspective of servant to God.
- ❑ Works not recorded in writing, preserved via oral tradition.

Poetry Examples

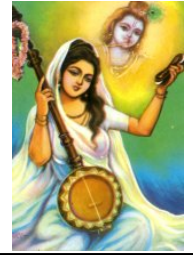


*“Life without Hari is no life, friend,
And though my mother-in-law fights,
my sister-in-law teases,
the Rana is angered,
A guard stationed on a stool outside,
and a lock is mounted on the door,
How can I abandon the love I have loved
In life after life?
Mira’s Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter:
Why would I want anyone else?”*

*“Sister, I had a dream that I wed
the Lord of those who live in need:
Five hundred sixty thousand people came
and the Lord of Braj was the groom.
In dream they set up a wedding arch;
in dream he grasped my hand;
in dream he led me around the wedding
fire
and I became unshakably his bride.
Mira’s been granted her mountain-lifting
Lord:
From living past lives, a prize.”*

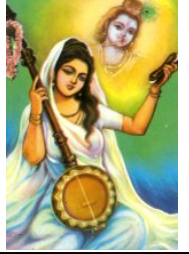
Source: John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, eds. and trans., *Songs of the Saints of India*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988,

Impact on Society

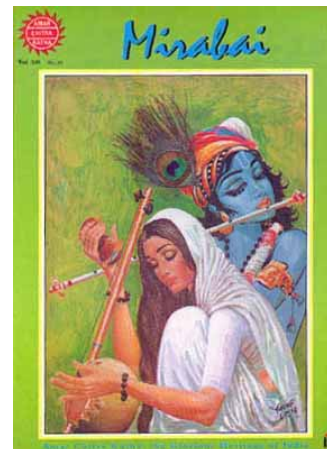
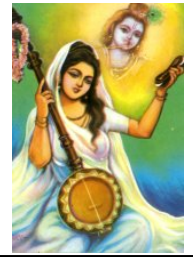


- Mirabai's willingness to sacrifice family respect and traditional gender, family, and caste restrictions, and to devote herself completely and enthusiastically to Krishna, made her an important role model in a religious movement that stressed ecstatic devotion and that rejected traditional divisions based on sex, class, caste, and creed.
- Mirabai broke many social norms, which in turn increased her appeal.
 - She did not recognize social and caste barriers and adopted the untouchable Sri Ravidas as her Guru.
 - By abandoning her domestic role, she expresses a kind of female liberation (that a Rajput woman of high standing should do so was at the time scandalous).
 - She rebelled against injustice within the family
 - Her rejection of the wealthy and life of riches
 - She became a wandering saint, a traditionally male role.
- Her name is still used to influence women; saying that a woman is like Mirabai has different connotations:
 - She is unwomanly and destined for trouble if she does not straighten up and conform to tradition, or
 - She is a free spirit with the strength of character to stand up for what she believes.

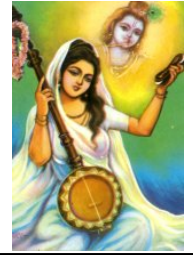
Mirabai's Legacy: My daughter, Meera



Mirabai Images



Sources



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