Mirabai at the Court of Guru Gobind Singh

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Everything about the poet-saints of North India seems to circulate: the songs that bear their names, the performers who sing them, the motifs that are conjoined to form these saints’ traditional life-stories, the manuscripts in which such stories and the songs attributed to these saints are recorded, and finally, of course, the saints themselves, whose lives often trace telling itineraries. Circulation itself seems to be one of the factors that turns an ordinary bhakta into a saint.

We see this certifying power of circulation in the great debating tours (digvijaya, śāstrārtha) that are often encoded into the lives of those bhaktas who come to play the role of preceptor (ācārya), including Madhva, Chaitanya, and Vallabha. But circulation is also a prominent motif in the biographies of other bhaktas too—the wanderings of Surdas or Namdev, or the story that we hear in Sikh hagiographies about how Kabir was attracted into the magnetic presence of Baba Nanak.¹ The Kabir we meet, when such a thing happens, is not exactly the Kabir who is remembered in his hometown, Banaras. The same is true for other “bhakti period” bhaktas as well. Circulation does not merely certify, it alters. This essay will focus on a surprising and little-known example of this phenomenon: What happens to Mirabai when she—or rather, her story—visits the Punjab?

1. Circulatory and Stationary Miras

Mirabai was hardly a homebody. Anyone who knows her story knows that she traveled to Vrindavan, where she was led while searching for Krishna. Mirabai’s attempt to enter the religious culture of Vrindavan precipitated

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an unusual intellectual exchange with the Chaitanyite theologian Jiva Gosvami—or as reported later on, his uncle Rupa Gosvami. Our earliest description of this rendezvous occurs in the *Bhaktirasabodhini* (Awakening Religious Sentiment) of Priyadas, written in Vrindavan in 1712. There we hear how Mirabai requested an audience with Jiva, but was rebuffed on the grounds that it would destroy the vow he had made to observe perfect celibacy: This evidently included verbal celibacy along with all the rest. Mirabai’s rejoinder is famous. She told Jiva that in Vrindavan everyone is a woman; there’s only one man in town—Krishna. That did indeed produce a meeting with the great scholar, and the very fact of it was a theological victory for Mirabai.

We see this motif both extended and up-ended in the *Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavan ki Vārtā*, the preeminent hagiographical text of the Vallabhan Sampraday. Here Vallabhacharya’s emissary to Gujarat, Krishnadas, refuses to meet with Mirabai as he makes his journey west. This time it would seem the counterstructural logic of bhakti would be on Krishnadas’s side, since Mirabai is styled a queen while he is only a *shudra*. Yet gender trumps caste: it is once again he who, as the man involved, refuses to have concourse with a woman. And it is Mirabai, the woman, who champions the idea that bhakti should circulate with complete freedom.

We also have the story of how Mirabai herself traveled to Gujarat. Priyadas’s version of her life ends famously in Dwarka, where she is assumed into the very form of Krishna, as manifest in the temple of Ranchor. This motif may reflect the fact that poems connected with her name were early on performed not just in Brajbhasha but in linguistic forms suggesting locations farther west. Alas, we cannot say for sure, since we have almost no access to poems bearing Mirabai’s signature in anything like her own lifetime: Only two poems can be traced to the sixteenth century with reasonable assuredness. But we certainly know that Mirabai’s Gujarati persona has become a major issue in modern scholarship about her. Much effort has been devoted to explaining how and when Mirabai’s Gujarati poems—as opposed to those performed in Rajasthani or Brajbhasha—came to be composed in that language.

The story of Mirabai’s life that has come to be conventional in the present day places her in each of the three regions that claims a poetic corpus

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