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Mīrābāī—a Saint or a Rebel?

SUMMARY: There have been many attempts to narrate the life of Mīrābāī, the 16th-century Rajasthani princess and *sant* poetess. The extent of the texts centred around her life ranges from a few verses in Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl* from the beginning of the 17th-century to the 20th/21st-century monographs. It substantially increases with time, especially in the past century, as well as does the quantity of information these texts provide to their readers. This paper compares the life writings by/about Mīrā from the two centuries after Mīrā's alleged death with recent biographical material on Mīrā's life and tries to classify the specific tendencies in interpreting her life in the recent publications as well as to identify the reasons behind them.

KEYWORDS: Mīrābāī, biography, *bhakti* poetry, *viraha*, Krishna, Rajasthan, Old Rajasthani, Brajbhasha, Early Modern Hindi

There have been many attempts to narrate the life of Mīrābāī, the famous 16th-century Rajasthani princess and *sant* poetess, as far as we know, starting from the beginning of the 17th century. In some of the narrations, Mīrā features as a *bhakta*, fully devoted to the worship of her beloved Kṛṣṇa; in others, she is depicted as a revolutionary figure fighting for social and gender justice.

This paper was inspired by the exposition of various cases of appropriation of Mīrā by Parita Mukta in her path-breaking book, which describes the living personality of Mīrā as it emerges from the songs of the people of Mewar, Marwar and Saurashtra (Mukta 1994). This dormant inspiration was rekindled while translating *pada*s attributed to Mīrā into Czech and facing the necessity of selecting material for translation from a collection of extremely diverse poems regarding literary style, content and the depiction of the character

of the poetess. In some of the *pada*s, Mīrā appears as a *virahiṇī*, unconditionally devoted to and longing for her absent Girdhar;[1] in others, she is an angry woman who has been cheated on and scolds Kānhā, who comes home drunk, for sleeping around; she can be an innocent young wife seduced by Kanhaiyā, or a self-confident female renouncer (*sannyāsinī*), who has given up all attachment and set out on her way to liberation from *saṃsāra*. And it was not just the choice of poems; even a slight change in the translation had the power to turn a desolate woman desperately reaching out to her lover into an independent pilgrim on her quest for *mokṣa*; an omitted verse sufficed to change an enraged, but finally forgiving and devoted lover into a self-assured and assertive woman.

The unsettling, yet seductive freedom to shape Mīrā's character in accordance with one's own inclination made me want to explore more systematically what decisions different authors—Mīrā scholars, collectors of her *pada*s and other translators—had taken while depicting her life and character, and this is also the aim of this paper.

For this purpose, it is essential to look at the extent of this liberty to interpret Mīrā, which means that the information about Mīrā that has been preserved to us from a period closer to her lifetime has to be re-examined. To accomplish this, it is necessary to summarize the facts about the poetess contained in particular texts, dating back approximately to the two centuries following the assumed date of her death (mid-16th century). The obtained information will then serve as a base for comparison with the abundant data provided by several important works on Mīrā' that originated in the last fifty years.

Before it grows to become a magnificent river of editions, translations and monographs in the 20th and 21st centuries, the source of information about Mīrā starts as a thin trickle with fleeting mentions in *bhakti* literature and Rajasthani genealogies as there is no tradition (*sampradāy*) that would preserve her songs, unlike Kabīr's or

[1] This epithet of Kṛṣṇa has many variants, such as Giridhārī, Giridharlāl, Girdhalāl, etc.

Sūrdās's.[2] The first allusion to Mīrā occurs in a mid-sixteenth century work of *bhakti* literature by Harirām Vyās. While praising various *bhakta*s in his *pada*s, he briefly mentions Mīrā along with Kabīr, Raidās (Ravidās), Sūrdās and others.[3] The next preserved reference to Mīrā occurs in *Bhaktamāl* by Nābhādās, a member of the Rāmānandī Sampradāy (c. AD 1600). This work belongs to the genre of collections of life stories of famous *sant*s written by members of various traditions. It states:

> *loka lāja kula-śr̥ṅkhalā taji mīrā giridhara bhajī.*
> *sadr̥śa gopikā prema pragaṭa, kalijugahiṃ dikhāyau.*
> *nira aṅkuśa ati niḍara, rasika jasa rasanā gāyau.*
> *duṣṭani doṣa bicāri, mr̥tyu ko uddima kīyau.*
> *bāra na bāṃkau bhayau, garala amr̥ta jyoṃ pīyau.*
> *bhakti nisāna bajāya kai, kāhū te nāhina lajī.*
> *loka lāja kula śr̥ṅkhalā taji mīrā giridhara bhajī.*
> (Nābhādās 1969: 712–713)

> Mīrā left behind worldly shame and family chains and praised Girdhar.
> In the age of Kali, she showed the devotion of a *gopī*.
> Without restraints and fearless, she praised her lover with her tongue.
> Evil people found her guilty and tried to kill her.
> Not a hair on her head was harmed, she drank poison like the nectar of immortality.
> Beating the drum of *bhakti*, she feared nothing,
> Mīrā has left behind worldly shame and family chains and praised Girdhar.[4]

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[2] Regarding *bhakti* literature, it is necessary to keep in mind that the authors of these sources, mainly life narratives, were primarily concerned with issues of *bhakti*, which reflected on the focus and content of their works.

[3] *itanau hai savu kuṭamu hamārau seṃni dhanānand nāmā pīpā aura kavīra raidāsa camārau rūpa sanātana kau sevaka gaṅgala bhaṭa sudārau sūradāsa paramānanda mehā mīrāṃ bhakti vicārau*, "These all make up my family: Sen, Dhanānand, Nāmdev, Pīpā and Kabīr; [and] Raidās, the cobbler. Of Rūpa and Sanātana a servant, Gaṅgal Bhaṭṭ melted [my heart]. I have reflected on the *bhakti* of Sūrdās, Parmānand, Mehā, and Mīrā. (Pauwels 2009: 145).

[4] The translation is made by the author of this article.

It does not really provide us with too many concrete details. The only thing we learn is that Mīrā violated the worldly notions of right conduct and family honour and openly declared devotion to Girdhar. "Evil people" tried to kill her and she survived a murder attempt by poison.

Other *Bhaktamāl*s do not diverge much from the account given by Nābhādās. They provide additional details that sometimes betray their allegiance to a certain tradition:[5] Dhruvdās of the Rādhavallabha Sampradāy (1695) stresses Mīrā's stay in Vrindavan, where she danced for her Lord;[6] Dādupanthī Rāghavdās (1713), who previously belonged to a *vaiṣṇava* tradition, adds that Mīrā's sitting among the *sant*s and singing, her *vaiṣṇava* devotion, was the reason for the *rāṇā*'s[7] attempt to kill her.

The next known source, *Raidās parchāī* by Anantadās (ca. 1665), contains a story that might have been crucial for later establishment of a connection between Mīrā and Raidās. According to Anantadās, a certain Jhālī queen of Chittaur, who was in some later versions of the story identified with Mīrā, searched for a guru and finally took initiation from Raidās in Benares (Callewaert 2000: 320–322). She offered him money and later sent him a letter inviting him to Chittaur; after consulting Kabīr, Raidās complied.

Rajasthani chronicles, *khyāt*s, are another important source of information about Mīrā.[8] *Jodhpur khyāt* of Muṃhatā Naiṇsī from mid-17th century states that "people say that" Bhojrāj, one of the sons of Mahārāṇā Sāṅgā of Chittaur, and Mīrā Rāthauṛ got married. There is unfortunately no preserved manuscript of the *khyāt* so the information might be of a later date (Hawley 2005: 90). Mīrā's name appears

[5] This phenomenon is by no means limited to the medieval period; e.g V.K. Sethi claims that Mīrā has found the Lord through her Master Raidās; the Master alone holds the keys to open the door of salvation and it was only through the grace of Raidās that she could attain her objective (Sethi 2009: 8–9).

[6] "Wandered in the pleasure fields of Vrindavan", "tying bells to her anklets and taking up the *kartāl*s" (Martin 1996: 8).

[7] Ruler of Mewar.

[8] See Taft 2002.

in the genealogies of the Merta clan at the beginning of the 18th century in a note stating that Ratansiṃh, the third son of Rāv Dūdā, was given the village Kurki and had only one child, Mīrā, whom he married to the Rāṇā of Chittaur (Hawley 2005: 92).

Another significant source of information is the Vallabhite *Caurāsī vaiṣṇavan kī vārtā* attributed to Gokulnāth. The oldest version that has been preserved is the one with Harirāy's commentary from 1695. It narrates how Vallabha's shudra pupil Kṛṣṇadās met Mīrā who was surrounded by many *sant*s when he was travelling to get donations. According to the story, he refused to even touch her generous gift saying that she was not a pupil of Vallabhācārya. Another Vallabhite, Rāmdās, gets offended when he sings Vallabāhcārya's *pada*[9] and she asks him to sing another *pada*. He calls her a whore (*rāṇḍa*) several times and promises never to see her face again.[10]

An interesting interpretation of Mīrā's life story is given in *Prem ambodh* (1693), a work by an unknown author containing life stories of sixteen *bhakta*s including Kabīr, Raidās and Mīrā and probably composed for the court of Guru Gobind Siṃh (Hawley and Mann 2013: 105–138). In *Prem ambodh*, Mewar is her parental home and she does not travel beyond its boundaries. She got married to a royal prince called Giridhar, but "took him for a beast and refused to bed with him" until he uttered the name of Rām and proved himself as a *bhakta* (Hawley and Mann 2013: 122–123). Another important detail that distinguishes the narration of *Prem ambodh* from most of the others is that the ruler who tries to poison her is her own father. *Prem ambodh* also already in the third verse mentions the story of the disciple–guru relationship between Mīrā and Raidās and thereby becomes the first extant source that explicitly mentions Mīrā by name in this context. Just like in the stories about the Jhālī queen, Brahmans felt disturbed when Mīrā grasped Raidās's feet in a plea for spiritual guidance.

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9 Or a *pada* about Vallabhācārya?

10 See Gokulnāth 1970.

A substantial proportion of the information we find in modern books on Mīrā is based on the undoubtedly most detailed narration of her life contained in the influential 18th-century commentary on Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl* called *Bhaktirasabodhinī*, written in 1712. The author of the commentary, Priyādās, was associated with the Caitanya sampradāy in Vrindavan.

Compared to Nābhādās, Priyādās is much more eloquent (Nābhādās 1969: 714–723). He identifies Mīrā as a princess from the princely state of Merta, who was married to an unspecified *rāṇā* from Mewar. During the wedding, only Kṛṣṇa was on her mind with whom she was in love since her childhood (in the form of Girdhar, the Lifter of the mountain Govardhan). When she came to her husband's house, she brought her Giridharlāl statue (*mūrti*) with her and refused to bow to the family goddess Kālī, saying that she has devoted her life to Giridhārī. The mother-in-law complained to her king husband (*rāṇā*) and the infuriated *rāṇā* set his mind on killing her and gave her a separate place to live. Mīrā spent all her time in company of *sādhu*s and *sant*s, singing praises of Kṛṣṇa. Her sister-in-law tried to dissuade her from dwelling in their company, explaining that it brought dishonour upon both families, but Mīrā retorted that the meetings (*satsaṅg*) made her happy. Thereafter she was sent a cup of poison, which she drank without any adverse effects. Priyādās further mentions a case when *rāṇā*'s spy heard Mīrā talking and laughing with an unknown man in her room. Nevertheless, when the *rāṇā* entered the room with a sword, he saw her talking to her Giridharlāl statue. In the next story, Mīrā is approached by a false *sādhu* for sexual intercourse under the pretext that it is the order of Giridhārī himself. She agrees, asks him to take food, and in the meanwhile prepares a bed in the middle of the gathering (*satsaṅg*), explaining that if it is the order of Giridhārī, they should execute it without any hesitation. The false *sādhu*'s face pales, he loses his appetite and falls to her feet, begging her to grant him devotion. Priyādās also narrates a story about emperor Akbar coming along with Tānsen to see Mīrā's beauty and experiencing bliss after seeing Giridharlāl. He further describes how she went to Vrindavan,

where she met with Jīva Gosvāmī, who abandoned his vow (probably not to talk to women, as later commentators explain) in order to see her. Having realised how impure the mind of the *rāṇā* was, she finally settled down in Dwarka. When *rāṇā*'s men came to persuade her to come back home on the behest of the king, who in the meanwhile realised the nature of her *bhakti* and wanted her to come back, she merged with the local idol of Kṛṣṇa (Raṇachoṛ). These very topoi are the starting points for most authors writing about Mīrā in later times. *Bhaktirasabodhinī* also mentions queen Jhālī of Chittor, who once visited Ravidās (Hawley 2005: 132).

The last comparatively early source of information about Mīrā is *Pada prasaṅga mālā* attributed to Nāgarīdās, a Rājpūt prince from Kishangarh (c. 1750). As Heidi Pauwels states,[11] among stories about other *sant*s and their poems, the text includes six Mīrā's *pada*s and five *prasaṅga*s. Nāgarīdās brings a new element into Priyādās's story—Mīrā's husband dies and she refuses to commit *satī*. The evil *rāṇā* in this story is her deceased husband's elder brother. *Pada prasaṅga mālā* also mentions Nārāyan Dās dancing to Mīrā's song S*ācau prīti hī ko nātau*. A line from this song[12] is quoted already in the *Bhaktamāl* in the same context, though not mentioning Mīrā's name, which could be evidence for an early occurrence of this song.

What about the information contained in the earliest preserved *pada*s attributed to Mīrā? John Stratton Hawley has sought after them and he found six of them which date before the end of the 17th century (Hawley 2005: 103–116).Their language shows mostly Braj features with a few Rajasthani traits.[13] The *pada*s are: *Manu hamāro bāndhiu māī* (Kartārpur manuscript of Guru Granth Sāhib (1604), the so-called Banno version of Guru Granth Sāhib (1642) and Ḍholā Mārū manuscript (1644) preserved in Gujarāt Vidyā Sabhā in Ahmedabad), *Sācau prīti hī ko nātau* (in above-mentioned Nāgarīdās's *Pada prasaṅga mālā*

[11] See Pauwels 2010.

[12] "*madanamohana raṅga rātau*", "dyed in Kṛṣṇa's passion".

[13] For more information, see Melnikova 2008.

from the middle of the 18th century, Nābhādās quotes it in *Bhaktamāl*), *Bhāya rī śāebā pakanī jara* (Gujarāt Vidyā Sabhā in Ahmedabad), *Nainā lobhī re*, *Ghumāre nayana* and *Nīsagata tamacara bole* (Rājasthān Prācyavidyā Pratiṣṭhān). These *pada*s talk exclusively about Mīrā's love for Girdhar and her suffering of separation, *viraha*. Only one of them mentions a suspecting mother-in-law and sister-in-law, otherwise there are no concrete details regarding Mīrā's life. The inclusion of the last verse, *chāp*, mentioning Mīrā, often accompanied by Girdhar (Nāgar), does not mean that they were actually composed by a historical personality called Mīrābāī (Hawley 2005: 44–47).

We have summarized the most important information that has been preserved in manuscripts approximately until the mid-18th century, i.e., approximately two centuries after Mīrā's alleged date of death. As we have seen, the earliest sources are very meagre. Apart from the information that Mīrā abandoned modesty and family ties for Kṛṣṇa, the Lifter of the mountain, and malevolent people unsuccessfully tried to poison her, and a few *pada*s speaking about the love and longing of a lonely woman for her beloved, there are no other (auto)biographical details. Only later, especially from Priyādās, we get to know more details about her family life, wanderings and encounters. What of course remains inaccessible to us are the early stories and legends about Mīrā's life that were transmitted through oral tradition.

Having thus established a stepping stone for further analysis, in the next stage we will focus on a specific aspect of Mīrā's life story and use it as an example that will help us illustrate the ways in which her story and character were later interpreted. As has been mentioned above, this paper was inspired by the work of Parita Mukta. In one of the chapters of *Upholding the Common Life*, she shows how M. K. Gāndhī introduced Mīrā as an "ideal wife" who faithfully abode by the rules of conduct pertaining to her. She showed passive resistance to her beloved *rāṇā* to make him understand her Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, and in the end succeeded. Parita Mukta considers this interpretation of Mīrā a distortion of Mīrā's character. She sets it in contrast to her field research findings that bear witness to the "people's Mīrā"—a symbol

of emancipation and crossing the boundaries of caste and gender for many, especially for women and lower castes. She claims that when "people's Mīrā" talks about the *rāṇā* who was trying to poison her, she actually talks about her husband. She points out that in order to portray Mīrā as a "chaste woman", their patriarchal thinking makes the (male) authors writing about her life either claim that she refused to have physical relations with her husband, because she was faithful to Kṛṣṇa, or that she became a *bhakta* only after a happy (obviously consumed) marriage with the *rāṇā*.[14]

How does Mukta herself view Mīrā's conjugal relationship? She claims that Mīrā refused to accept the relationship with the *rāṇā*, from performing "marital duties" to committing *satī* after her husband's death (Mukta 1994: 65). Moreover, Mīrā continued to deny the relationship even after her husband's death. She rejected the status of a widow along with its rules of conduct established by the Rājpūt patriarchy and spent all her time with itinerant *bhakta*s (Mukta 1994: 65–66). Mukta's Mīrā is the Mīrā of Rajasthani dalit communities, weavers, leather workers and sweepers, who are linked to Mīrā through Rohidās (Raidās). But in particular, it is a community of women, especially "of all those women who have suffered the violence of a forced intimacy" (Mukta 1994: 135). Mīrā has "carved out a path for personal liberation for women" (Mukta 1994: 132). She does not adopt the other-worldliness of renunciation, on the contrary, she returns to the centre of the society, but this time it is the society of the subaltern (Mukta 1994: 95). Mukta's Mīrā is the fearless uplifter and liberator of the oppressed, either in terms of caste or gender.

Apparently, the details of the relationship between Mīrā and her husband seem to bear a crucial importance for the interpretation of her

[14] Nevertheless, as Heidi Pauwels states in her review, what Parita Mukta calls a distortion should be rather termed an interpretation common for the *bhajan* genre. Moreover, Parita Mukta herself does not refrain from the search for authenticity and seems to find the "real Mīrā" in the songs of the people she recorded. See Pauwels 1996: 395.

persona. Was the marriage consummated? If not, for what reason? Did Mīrā refuse to commit *satī* and if yes, why? Could her behaviour as a widow be justified from any angle? All these are disputed issues, and the way different authors writing on Mīrā's life approach them appears to be symptomatic of their political views and societal values.[15]

How was this controversial topic treated in the works of Mīrābāī scholars, collectors of her *pada*s and translators? Paraśurām Caturvedī, a lawyer by profession, who took great interest in *sant* literature, authored the most popular, influential and most often translated *Mīrā padāvalī* (Caturvedī 1932). Nevertheless, Hawley criticises *Mīrā padāvalī* for containing "only the scantiest scholarly apparatus and no reference at all to the manuscripts upon which it is based" and for being based on "unknown sources and methods" (Hawley 2005: 118, 341). Apart from that, while composing his *Mīrā padāvalī*, he allegedly used very late manuscripts from the 18th century without any critical approach and even some 19th century manuscripts.[16] As many modern translations of Mīrā's poetry are at least partly based on his edition, it will be intriguing to see what he has to say about her life, and especially about her relationship with Kṛṣṇa and the *rāṇā*.

According to Paraśurām Caturvedī, Girdharlāl became her "*iṣṭ*", her chosen deity already when she was a child (Caturvedī 2003: 17–26). When a *sant* came once to her father's house in Kurki, she saw a beautiful Girdharlāl statue during the *pūjā* he performed. She was attracted to it and tried to acquire it, but the *sant* refused to give it to her and went away. Mīrā stopped eating and drinking. The *sant* was instructed in a dream that he should give the statue to Mīrā. Since then she kept it with her. "People say" that when a neighbour was getting married, Mīrā asked her mother who is going to be her husband and her mother pointed at the statue. From that moment Mīrā was in deep love with Kṛṣṇa. According to Paraśurām Caturvedī, in one of her *pada*s, Mīrā

[15] Another potentially controversial topic is the alleged teacher-student (*guru-śiṣya*) relationship between Raidās and Mīrā, as has been mentioned above.

[16] Personal conversation with Arvind Siṃh Tejāvat, August 2011.

talks about her marriage to Kṛṣṇa in a dream. Later she was married off to Mewar, to *rāṇā* Sāṅgā's son Bhojrāj. She lived happily with her husband, who nevertheless died very soon. According to Caturvedī, "people say"[17] that she brought the statue with her to her husband's house and she performed *pūjā* throughout the marriage. After her husband expired, she shed the chains of worldly relationships and became even more attached to her beloved deity. Approximately five years later Mahārāṇā Sāṅgā died too. She got fully immersed in devotion and spending time with *sādhu*s *and sant*s. Whenever they came, she would leave her worldly shame and serve and honour them with great belief. People started coming to see her and talk to her from remote areas. This was clearly being perceived as harming the honour of the royal family. The subordinates of Mahārāṇā Sāṅgā and her husband's younger brother Mahārāṇā Ratansiṃh and the whole family tried to dissuade her from her behaviour, but she did not heed their advice. Ratansiṃh's brother Vikramajīt became Mahārāṇā after Ratansiṃh was killed. He was an incompetent king and extremely unpopular. He tried to kill Mīrā by sending her first poison and then a snake. Mīrā finally left Mewar; she lived happily in Vrindavan with Jīva Gosvāmī for some time. Finally, she left for Raṇachoṛ temple in Dwarka. When Brahmans from Merta and Mewar came to bring her back, she entered the Raṇachoṛ temple and never came out. Another important personality connected to modern Mīrā studies is C. L. Prabhāt, a famous Mīrā expert, a collector of her *pada*s and the author of a well-known monograph on Mīrā called *Mīrā—jīvan aur kāvya* (Prabhāt 1999). He was criticised by J. S. Hawley (2005: 3–4), in particular for his

[17] Though Paraśurām Caturvedī adds "people say" when talking about an orally transmitted information, he does not hesitate at all to consider Mīrā's *pada*s available to him a relevant autobiographical source. It is worth noticing that the information he (along with most modern authors) provides is much exacter and much more detailed that anything we have encountered in the old sources. In his account, he even gives exact years or at least a choice of years for every event in Mīrā's life; however, he only rarely mentions his sources.

alleged willingness to allow any poem emerging over time irrespective of the dates when such poems entered the stream of manuscripts attributed to Mīrā, to be associated with historical Mīrābāī, believing that linguistic criteria will be enough to filter out "later interpolations".[18] Prabhāt claims that Mīrā's songs contain the true story of her life. He calls her *pada*s "a kind of autobiography" and the biography he has written is partly based on the information that he extracted from them. He also uses in his work the Dakor manuscript which is most probably forged (Hawley 2005: 100–103). What does he conclude for Mīrā's life story?

According to C. L. Prabhāt, Mīrā was born in Rāṭhauṛī Merta to Ratnasiṃh and got married to Bhojrāj, the son of Rāṇā Sāṅgā, when she was 12 (Prabhāt 1999: 94–155). Nevertheless, Mīrā married Bhojrāj only with her body, Girdhar with her mind. Since childhood she was immersed in Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. Prabhāt spends a lot of time discussing the identity of Mīrā's husband, but avoids any comments on their mutual relationship and never mentions the possibility of a dissonance between the two of them. He turns directly to her widowhood and states that she decided not to become *satī* as she had Girdhar on her mind. Hardships started for her when Rāṇā Sāṅgā died in the battle with Akbar. She was of independent nature and used to meet *sādhu*s and *sant*s which offended royal honour. Rāṇī Karmetī, along with *rāṇā* (her evil son Vikramāditya), despised her for that. After several efforts were made to dispose of her, Mīrā left the place and travelled to Dakor, Pushkar, Vrindavan and Dwarka.

As a third example, I have chosen an aspiring Mīrābāī scholar Arvind Siṃh Tejāvat, who has recently obtained his PhD from

[18] The criteria of authenticity of Mīrā's *pada*s have been preserved in an unpublished document signed by C. L. Prabhāt himself along with five other scholars. They are actually not only linguistic; they include: occurrence in several manuscripts in the same form, the use of the 15th-century Rajasthani, Brajbhasha, Western Rajasthani or Gujarati, *vaiṣṇava bhakti*, simple woman's nature, not compromising with one's principles, musicality, brevity and emotionality.

Jawaharlal Nehru University and published two books on Mīrā. In his book entitled *Mīrā's Life*, he states that Hindi literary criticism has not done justice to Mīrā Bāī (Tejāvat 2015: 11–40). According to Tejāvat, in the process of moulding Mīrā into an outstanding *bhakta*, influenced by the interpretation of Mīrā by medieval Brahman *bhakta*s, the literary critiques have deliberately omitted the fact that she was a leader of a political and social movement. She did not only challenge feudalism in medieval age, but also started a female protest movement. As a result of this omission, only songs of a certain type were included in the collections of Mīrā's *pada*s. In the same way, particular topics found their way into her biography, e.g., the childhood love for the deity, the presence of the statue during the marriage rituals, the refusal to consummate the marriage, etc. Tejāvat claims that all these components of Mīrā's story were made up by the custodians of purity and Brahmanical values, whereas in the reality, Mīrā declared her marriage to Kṛṣṇa only after her husband's death in order to avoid *satī*. In his opinion, there seems to be no reason why Mīrābāī and Bhojrāj should not have had a normal relationship. He argues that she would not have been allowed to stay at the Chittaur fortress if it had not been the case, and there would be more mentions of Bhojrāj's other marriages. The culprits behind the efforts to kill her were Rāṇī Karmetī and her son Vikramāditya. He further states that the 500-year-long process of appropriation of Mīrā misled female scholars, in particular Kumkum Sangari, into thinking that Mīrā was sexually unavailable to her husband, and finds this idea unacceptable (Tejāvat 2015: 19).

What does Kumkum Sangari herself in her famous article (Sangari 1990: 1464–1475) say about this matter and what interpretation of Mīrā's life does she offer? For Kumkum Sangari, the question is to what extent Mīrā actually breaks the norms of the contemporary feudal Rājpūt society. She comes to the conclusion that in her choice of ascetic lifestyle after her husband's death, Mīrā selects one of the ways of life that the societal norms that apply to her permit. She does break the mandatory seclusion of an upper caste/Rājpūt widow, but respects all the other articles of the widow's protocol and by

proclaiming Kṛṣṇa her husband, she stays within the same patriarchal structure (Sangari 1990: 1467–1468). Sangari makes her readers fully aware of the uncertain origin of all information regarding Mīrā's life that is available. Nevertheless, she bases her analysis on the presupposition that Mīrā indeed refused to consummate the marriage, thus breaking the norms of conjugal relationship of her society, which was read by her husband and father-in-law as adultery and made her an errant wife, but at the same time a perfect (celibate) saint.

It becomes apparent that there is a huge variety of opinions among Mīrābāī scholars regarding her marital affairs. Does the same apply to the translators? To look into the matter, I have chosen three examples: the famous renditions by A. J. Alston (Alston 1980) and Shama Futehally (Futehally 1994) into English and a more recent translation into German by Shubhra Parashar (Parashar 2005).

A. J. Alston used the 15th edition of Paraśurām Caturvedī's selection of Mīrā's *pada*s as the source material for his translation. In his introductory depiction of Mīrā's life, he retells the story of the itinerant *sādhu* and the marriage to Kṛṣṇa in a dream. Regarding the marriage with the *rāṇā*, the only thing that he mentions is that their union was childless and that Mīrā speaks of herself as a virgin in her poems.

Shama Futehally also uses, among other works, Paraśurām Caturvedī's edition for her translation. She also reveals her admiration for Kumkum Sangari and her work on Mīrā. In her introduction to the translation, the recurring topics occur—an itinerant *sant* bringing Kṛṣṇa's statue; performing marriage rituals with the statue, refusal to worship Durgā and consummate the marriage. The evil *rāṇā* is her husband's younger brother Vikramāditya.

Shubhra Parashar mentions the 1976 edition of Paraśurām Caturvedī's selection as one of her sources as well. The itinerant *sant* in her narration of Mīrā's life story is Raidās himself. Mīrā refuses to consummate the marriage and her husband marries again; she declines to commit *satī* because the marriage was not consummated and she is in reality married to Kṛṣṇa. The evil *rāṇā*s are her husband's brothers.

The following table summarizes the differences between various sources:

Author	**Conjugal relationship**	**Marriage consummated**	***Satī***	**Evil *rāṇā***
Nābhādās	–	–	–	–
earliest poems	–	–	–	–
Prem ambodh	problems	no	–	father
Priyādās	–	–	–	father-in law
Pada prasaṅga mālā	–	–	refused	husband's elder brother
Paraśurām Caturvedī	happy marriage, fully immersed in Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* only after husband's death	supposedly yes	–	Vikramāditya
Kumkum Sangari	problems	no (obsessive religiosity)	refused (because of Kṛṣṇa)	–
Parita Mukta	refusal to accept the relationship	no	refused	husband
C. L. Prabhāt	–	supposedly yes	refused (because of Kṛṣṇa)	Vikramāditya
Arvind Siṃh Tejāvat	no problems	yes	refused (marriage to Kṛṣṇa an excuse)	Vikramāditya
A. J. Alston	–	probably not	–	–
Shama Futehally	problems	probably not	–	Vikramāditya
Shubhra Parashar	understanding, husband builds her a temple and marries again	no	refused (marriage not consummated and her true husband Kṛṣṇa)	Ratansiṃh, Vikramāditya

It has become quite obvious that even within this small space, among just a few authors, distinct tendencies and streams of thought reveal themselves. Before we delve deeper, it is important to reiterate that the topics in question only rarely occur in the early sources, not to mention the identification and detailed description of the characters that played a role in Mīrā's life story and even precise dates of her life events that are, often without much hesitation, displayed in the recent works.

In the above-mentioned examples of recent works, Mīrā's character apparently takes multiple, often mutually exclusive forms.

In all these narratives, she plays the role of a positive heroine[19] who has to overcome countless hurdles that are put in her way either by the representatives of the societal norms (political marriage practised by her community, rules of conduct of a Rājpūt married woman and widow guarded by her in-laws, celibacy of a saint in case of Jīva Gosvāmī), or by individuals driven by negative emotions (lust of a false *sādhu*, her husband's anger and jealousy, greed for power of her in-laws).

The interpretation of her character oscillates between many opposite poles, two of them being the fearless warrior and a strategising victim. Parita Mukta's and Arvind Tejāvat's Mīrā is fighting not only for herself, but for the downtrodden who face caste, class and gender discrimination. On the other hand, Kumkum Sangari introduces the idea of Mīrā becoming a victim of her own "obsessive religiosity" and patriarchy at the same time; being unable to fit into the scheme of householdership, she embraces the only socially approved alternative, the role of an ascetic widow.

A crucial point of dispute is her *bhakti*, so much stressed by the *bhakta* authors. On the one hand, she takes a form of an ideal *bhakta*, who is ready to sacrifice her life out of devotion to her beloved, and refuses to give her life away for another (*satī*). On the other hand, she becomes a revolutionary reformer, for whom proclaiming herself a bride of Kṛṣṇa is just a strategy to avoid adverse implications of societal norms such as *satī* (Tejāvat). Nevertheless, there are obviously many shades of grey between these opposites.

The *bhakti* side of Mīrā is very strongly emphasised in the film production. The 1945 Indian Tamil historical fiction film *Meera*, starring M. S. Subbulakṣmī and directed by Ellis R. Dungan, depicts Mīrā as an ideal *bhakta*, devoted to Kṛṣṇa since childhood. She is unable to perform the duties of a wife, but the *rāṇā*, in spite of several conflicts, shows understanding for her devotion. In this respect, the 1974 *Meera* with Hema Malinī later is much more retrograde. When Mīrā,

[19] Unlike in *Caurāsī vaiṣṇavan kī vārtā*, where she plays a supporting role, a negative character representing the "other", wrong form of *bhakti*.

due to her devotion to Kṛṣṇa, fails to fulfill the wishes of her husband and in-laws, she is imprisoned and sentenced to death by poison. Even the historical drama television series *Mīrā—Kṛṣṇa se lāgī aisī lagan ek rājkuvrī banī jogan* by Vipul Mehta (2009–2010) presents Mīrā as an ideal *bhakta*, whose devotion is irreconcilable with the demands of the householder world; nevertheless, she is sweet and soft spoken, and even while rejecting her husband, she does it in a gentle manner.

The evil *rāṇā* seems to be a crucial character in Mīrā's story. He appears in the songs as the one who "gets angry" and "sends Mīrā poison". Nābhādās does not mention him; Priyādās claims that he is her father-in-law; in *Prem ambodh* he is her own father. In most of the above-mentioned recent works, the *rāṇā* is Mīrā's husband's younger brother Vikramāditya (Vikramājīt). Parita Mukta explains that the unpopular king Vikramāditya gradually started being considered a better fit for the role than the popular candidates such as Kumbha, Sāṅgā or Bhojrāj (Mukta 1994: 26). However, the *rāṇā* who appears in people's *bhajan*s is Mīrā's husband himself, and Parita Mukta stresses the aspect of social imposition while discussing her unwillingness to consummate the arranged marriage. Nevertheless, the main reason for the refusal is the same in people's *bhajan*s as well as in the recent biographies of Mīrā—her exclusive love for Kṛṣṇa.[20]

It appears to be an interesting coincidence that none of the above-mentioned female authors hesitate to admit that there were problems in the marriage (though in the rendering of Shubhra Parashar the couple manages to resolve them—she gets a temple and he gets a new wife). They also do not shy away from stating that Mīrā refused to sleep with her husband, unlike most of their male counterparts, and this component of the narrative even becomes one of the cornerstones for both representatives of the feminist stream of thought among our authors, Kumkum Sangari and Parita Mukta. On the other hand, Paraśurām

[20] In this context, it should be noted that in case of many of the songs, it is difficult to draw a line between a *bhajan* devoted to the deity, and a "folk" song about longing and (mostly extramarital) love.

Caturvedī and Arvind Tejāvat explicitly hold the view that the marriage was happy (Caturvedī) and there were no indications of any problems (Tejāvat). Both of them consequently never even allude to the option of the absence of physical relations between the couple. Their Mīrā has to conform to the patriarchal modes of conduct. Only after the death of her husband is she allowed to develop deep devotion to Kṛṣṇa and start fulfilling the role of an (almost) ideal widow (an ideal female renouncer in any case). Especially in the case of Tejāvat, who otherwise tries to present Mīrā as an exemplary revolutionary, the strong reluctance to allow her to rebel against an arranged relationship is particularly striking. Does he perhaps not consider this attitude to be worth following? It is also interesting that although both Shama Futehally and Shubhra Parashar use Caturvedī's collection as one of their sources, none of them adopts his idea of marital bliss between Mīrā and the *rāṇā*. Do female authors in general perceive the right of a woman not to comply to the system of relationships imposed by the family/society in a different way than their male counterparts? The particular interpretations of Mīrā's life story provide ample possibilities for similar questions.

We sometimes imagine knowledge as gradually fading away and disappearing in the course of time. In case of Mīrābāī's life story, it seems to be the opposite—the information that has been preserved from her time period is extremely scant and only in the 20th century do the written sources really start to abound with (sometimes very detailed) data. One of the reasons can definitely be identified in the boom of writing in general, and writing down what had been preserved by oral tradition in particular. Anyone who has ever dealt with a living, unsystematised oral tradition, knows about the variations and mutations that inevitably arise. The variety of often disparate and even contradictory data occurring in recent written materials can be perhaps partly attributed to their origin in legends and songs preserved in various forms in the oral tradition. Yet there is another component to the story that must be considered. The scarcity of information provides the ideal opportunity for "creative interpretation". There is a plethora of male

heroes on the Indian scene, but how many heroines do we encounter? Mīrā is undoubtedly one of the few significant female characters that feature in the cultural consciousness of the subcontinent. At the same time, her personality which reflects two archetypes, a saint and a rebel, offers sufficient space for imagination and projection, which results in interpretation that often tells us more about the author than about Mīrā herself.

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