

MIRABAI, THE BELOVED MYSTIC POET OF INDIA

Daniel Ladinsky



Mirabai surrounded by devotees, ca. eighteenth century.

Mirabai (ca. 1498–1550) is the most renowned woman poet-saint of India, her songs sung by Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs alike. She was born a princess in the area of Rajasthan. Her great-grandfather founded the city of Jodhpur.

It has been said that when Mira was a small child she brought a plate of food to a sadhu (a wandering ascetic) at the palace gate. He whispered a few words in her ear and bestowed a tiny statue of Krishna into her hand, which she forever treasured. There are no other accounts of her having had a teacher or formal religious instruction, so perhaps those few words held some key to a spiritual awakening. Sometime later she questioned her mother about who would be her husband, as marriages were often arranged in the early

years of a girl's life. Her mother, perhaps not fathoming the seriousness of her daughter's inquiry, playfully pointed to the little statue of Krishna and answered that he would be Mira's groom. From that time onward Mira felt herself to be married to Krishna, and when the time came for her actual marriage, she refused to submit to being treated as a piece of property within the conventional marriage that had been arranged for her against her will.

Her husband died soon after their marriage, and this allowed Mira to begin leading a more religious life, toward which she had long felt inclined. She began seeking out the company of wandering sadhus and felt drawn to public temples that were usually only visited by low-caste devotees. Her presence at these

temples, and her singing and dancing and embracing of untouchables enraged her in-laws to such an extreme that they tried to kill her. Mira, when in her early thirties, renounced her title and position and fled. She herself became a sadhu, traveling much of northwestern India on foot, sleeping often in the open, sometimes near temples and mosques.

She was a fierce champion of human rights, especially women's rights, and with a shocking wit and penetrating insight would often expose the ridiculous aspects of politics, orthodox religion, the caste system, and chauvinistic oppression. Her songs often glorified the ascetic's life, and at times her poetry was very erotic. As a finely educated woman, she first composed her poems/songs in the ancient tradition of classical Indian poetry. In fact, Mira's love songs are said to have helped revitalize and evolve North Indian music. Even today her songs are very popular

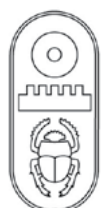
and sung by classical singers as well as heard throughout the streets of cities and in villages. Several thousand poems are attributed to her though perhaps only a few hundred are authentic. There is an account of a childhood handmaid of Mira, named Lalita, who may have followed her on her wanderings for a while, noting the songs down in a notebook. Records in the Ranchhorji temple at the coastal city of Dwarka, where Mira is last recorded as having lived, mention such a notebook. Mira spent the last few years of her life attending the destitute near the Ranchhorji temple and writing poems until she joined her Lord.



From the Penguin publication, *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*, by Daniel Ladinsky, copyright 2002. www.danielladinsky.com. With permission.



An actress in a play about Mirabai in India in 2022.





A HUNDRED OBJECTS CLOSE BY

I know a cure for sadness:

*Let your hands touch something that
makes your eyes smile.*

*I bet there are a hundred objects close by
that can do that.*

Look at

beauty's gift to us—

*her power is so great she enlivens
the earth, the sky,
our soul.*



A GREAT YOGI

In my travels I spent time with a great yogi.

Once he said to me,

“Become so still you hear the blood

flowing through your veins.”

One night as I sat in quiet,

I seemed on the verge of entering

a world inside so vast

I know it is the source of

all of us.

