SJIF Impact Factor (2024): 8.675| ISI I.F. Value: 1.241| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2016 ISSN: 2455-7838(Online)
EPRA International Journal of Research and Development (IJRD)
Volume: 9 | Issue: 12 | December 2024 - Peer Reviewed Journal

A JOURNEY THROUGH MIRA BHAJANS: THEMATIC LANDSCAPES OF INNER TRANSFORMATION, FEMININE DEVOTION, AND COSMIC ONENESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the theme and subject matter of Mira Bai's devotional songs, or bhajans. While they are certainly and obviously love poems for God, they are profoundly more than that. They are expressions of an inner transformation that the poet has lived through—one that attempts to articulate the desperation of the human spirit in a world where one's daily needs seem to rely on enforced and apparently oppressive conditions of existence. Though she wrote in the sixteenth century, her work resonates today more powerfully than that of even many contemporary figures. She sings of personal liberation in a way that speaks to a larger human condition. Indeed, one hears in her poetry the possibility of liberation not bound by time, space, or even culture.

KEYWORDS: *Mira Bai, Bhajans, Inner transformation, Feminine devotion, Cosmic oneness, Devotional songs, Spiritual desperation, Personal liberation, 16th century poetry.*

INTRODUCTION

The medieval Indian Bhakti movement emerged from between the 7th and 17th centuries as a significant and potent force religiously and culturally. It was a reform movement in the spiritual world that emphasized the personal devotion (bhakti) of individuals to their chosen Gods, which served as the central pivot around which the now-renascent group of worship traditions revolved. The movement's rise in both the northern and southern parts of India counters the former growing dominance of the practiced rituals in Hinduism and the exclusivity of Brahminical traditions. It glorified instead the kind of direct and intimate connection that the diverse multitude could have with the divine. The necessity of personal involvement in worship was once again re-established. One important feature of the movement points :

> The age of Bhakti is the age of emotions. Bhakti poets, therefore, become enthralled by the splendour of life in this world and make human feelings themselves the bedrock of devotional feelings and poetic creativity.(Pandey and Tyagi 136)

Bhakti was a movement that shared its virtues widely and well. It attracted many people, even those whom society typically marginalized. Poets and saints—such as Ramanuja, Kabir, Mirabai, Tulsidas, Surdas, Guru Nanak, and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu—became famous and revered figures within the movement. These individuals taught values through their poems and songs, making their messages simple enough for anyone to understand. The movement's messages were purposely designed to be inclusive; they brought people from all walks of life together as followers.

Indian society and religion faced a revolution at the hands of the Bhakti movement, which is often seen as a rediscovery of India's spiritual treasures. The movement challenged religious and social inequalities, provided the people with forms of cultural and linguistic identity, and gave them the means to find some kind of peace with the then-recent advent of political and social upheaval in medieval India. The universal appeal and the down-to-earth nature of the movement's poetry carried the message to the masses. In their eyes, it provided an almost unassailable case for the reformation of religion and society.

Mira Bai was a leading figure of the Bhakti movement in India, and is now recognized as one of that movement's most powerful voices—indeed, one of India's most powerful poet-saints. She was born in the 16th century into a Rajput royal family in Rajasthan but spent almost all of her life away from the comforts and social standing of her born identity. Pandey and Zide mention:

> It is said that Mirabai was the granddaughter of Rao Dudaji, who is known in the history of Mewar(Rajasthan) as the founder of Merta City. Mirabai was probably born in a village named Kudaki about A.D.1498.(55)

She lived in near-complete isolation and travelled widely as a simple, devoted spiritual practitioner. In the face of longstanding customs that restricted the lives of women and social barriers that kept women from crossing the lines of class, her life was exemplary and, indeed, revolutionary. Mira's poems often express the themes of union with the divine, renunciation of material things, and the kind of singularity that allows one to work against unorthodox family and societal norms in order to achieve an

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unorthodox kind of devotion. Mira Bai lived in the 16th century. “She spent her last days in Dwarika and probably passed away in 1546”(Pandey and Zide 59). Hers is the path of the heart, and though she lived a long time ago, even to us she seems to be a contemporary figure.

Unique Themes in Mira Bhajans

Mira Bai wonderfully expresses the self as a seeker of a union with Krishna. She paints beautiful images and metaphors of travel—rivers, roads, and thresholds—that not only symbolize the soul's quest for divine connection but also its turning inward for self-discovery and enlightenment. At the heart of this exploration, indeed central to it, is the often-unstated but profoundly understood thematic ego dissolution. Mira captures how her radical devotion to Krishna allows her to live in a space where ego boundaries don't exist. She revels in divine love and uses metaphors of pilgrimage, using physical signals to mark the soul's quest for transformation. The soul's transformative journey is exemplified in the following bhajan. Mira takes direct aim at social constraints, portraying the spiritual path as one that requires complete and total self-negation.

मैं गिरधर के घर जाऊँ।
गिरधर म्हांरो सांचो प्रीतम
देखत रूप लुभाऊँ।।
रैण पड़ै तबही उठ जाऊँ
भोर भये उठिआऊँ।
रैन दिना वाके संग खेलूं
ज्यूं त्यूं ताहि रिझाऊँ।।

To the Abode of Girdhar I go
For Girdhar is my true Beloved.
At whose sight. I stand enthralled.
At the approach of night I go to Him;
and at dawn, I start off.
Days and nights I pass in His company
playing with Him;
In a hundred ways I try to please him (Behari ,139)

Her bhajans lovingly impart the essence of something very simple yet profoundly transformative: the necessity of converting the mind, heart, and soul, a soporific space into a lit one, electrifying with devotion. Such is the power of this sacred force, reconnecting one to the divine. The implication is that the bhajan's invocation of the word transforms the devotee and not, as one might think, the close-to-dead "images of God" so often seen and encountered in traditional spaces of worship.

A powerful rebellion against society's established norms characterizes Mira Bai's life. She is not only a poet but also a spiritual figure. Rejecting the familiar, marital, and royal responsibilities that life had cast upon her (if such an epithet could be used in reference to her life), she chose to defy a fatally enforced path for women in her time and culture—the path of "good" daughters, wives, and mothers. Instead, she chose the path of a devotee and, in so doing, claimed the right to a kind of "autonomy," if one could consider that what she did was not a performance of the feminine role as envisioned by her society. Moreover, her creation carries a covert yet pointed critique of gender hierarchies: She proposes a model of equality where love and devotion trump gender distinctions. Her claim to divine connection is a universal one that resonates with all sorts of seekers. The art of Mira Bai that we see today is a potent symbol of resistance. The Mira Bai that we see today—if indeed, we would see her at all—is a potent symbol of resistance. The following lines show Mira's deliberate dismissal of familial and societal bonds. They indicate that she has no warm feelings for earthly relationships like those of father, mother, and brother. They point toward her commitment to spirituality. They signal her exclusive, intense attachment to the divine figure of Krishna. No earthly relationship can measure up to this all-consuming devotion in her eyes.

मेरे तो गिरधर गोपाल दूसरो न कोई॥
जाके सिर है मोरपखा मेरो पति सोई।
तात मात भ्रात बंधु आपनो न कोई॥
छांड़ि दई कुलकी कानि कहा करिहै कोई॥

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My Lord is Giridhar Gopal, there is no one else [for me]
Who wears a crown decorated with peacock feathers, is my husband
Father, mother, brother, friends [all other relationships], nobody is mine
I have totally renounced the reputation of family ("Mere to Giridhar Gopal")

Mira Bai expresses Krishna not merely as a god, but as the universal beloved, embodying the ultimate principle of love that infuses the cosmos. With her heart-wrenching poetry, she renders visible how not only all living beings but also all of nature—rivers, peacocks, and the changing seasons—are woven together in an embrace of shared love that connects them to Krishna, the divine. In that love, Mira makes visible the love that is the very fabric of our universe. These ecstatic unions form the basis of Mira's devotional songs, kirtans, or bhajans. In her songs, and in the dances that accompany many of them, she expresses her ecstatic love of Krishna and makes music with a deep sense of the unity of all existence, which is expressed in many traditions and languages. Her verses invite us to experience what she has experienced: the interconnectedness of all life. They hold an invitation to divine lovers everywhere to align harmoniously with the universal sentiment that Mira Bai expresses as the divine love that transcends all boundaries between lover and beloved. Mira Bai's songs pulse with the rhythm of life; they are an anthem of ecstatic love that transcends individuality and celebrates the interconnectedness of all that lives.

As a poet, Mira expresses the idea that divine essence is a treasure bringing together the spiritual and the material, the individual and the cosmic. Her poetry conveys that the soul's merging with the infinite through love and devotion gives rise to the dissolution of all boundaries of self in the poet's beloved one, Krishna, and reveals the unity of all creation in and through His love:

पायो जी मैंने राम रतन धन पायो

वस्तु अमोलिक दी मेरे सतगुरु
कृपा कर अपनायो। ।
पायो जी मैंने राम रतन धन पायो

जन्म जन्म की पूंजी पाई
जग में सभी खोआओ। ।
पायो जी मैंने राम रतन धन पायो

खर्च ना खूटे, चोर ना लूटे
दिन दिन बढ़त सवायो। ।

I have received the treasure of the name of Lord Ram.
My true guru has given me this invaluable wealth;
By his grace, he has accepted me.
I have found the wealth of lifetimes;
I have lost all worldly possessions.
This wealth neither diminishes nor gets stolen;

Day by day, it increases. **("Payo Ji Maine Ram Ratan Dhan Payo")**.
The loneliness and exile Mira Bai experiences become for her a source of powerful devotional energy. What we might see as a woman on the margins, living in a kind of forced isolation, Mira reframes as a potent metaphor for what one must endure in order to achieve a kind of singular spiritual mastery. Her profound poetry arises from a mystical place, a kind of secret, shamanic knowledge, in which she understands that a pathway to true devotion is often passed down a so-called dead end. What, after all, is a hermit but one who has chosen a form of impenetrable solitude? Mira's sense of being in solitude is not of experiencing mere abandonment; she's not simply lonely. Indeed, she appears to savour it, to take it in, to dwell in it reflectively.

Mira's verse expresses a deep solitariness, one that might seem on first glance to echo a lost and forsaken figure who has been booted out of family and society. But this isn't what Mira is lamenting or even really expressing. She's saying that the path she has chosen requires complete and total rejection of worldly life. And in that rejection, she has found the kind of space—solitude, yes, but also sacredness—that allows her to commune with Krishna as no one else can.

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श्याम ! मने चाकर राखो जी,
गिरधारी लाल ! चाकर राखो जी।
चाकर रहसूं बाग लगासूं, नित उठ दर्शन पासूं,
वृन्दावन की कुंज गलिन में, तेरी लीला गासूं।

Shyam ! Take me in as Thy servant.
Girdhar Lal, make me Thy maid.
I shall be Thy maid, and beautiful gardens
for Thee I shall grow: in lieu I shall
Thy blessed visions enjoy;
In the lanes and bowers of Brindraban, Thy exploits I shall sing. (Behari, 133)

Mira Bai captures the delightful duality of Krishna being both an eternal force and a temporal presence in her life. She illustrates the complex interplay between the two realms with her devotion, which has crossed a far more significant number of boundaries than would have ordinarily been allowed in a 16th-century female figure. Krishna embodies the very essence of timeless love for Mira Bai. Yet, at the same time, he engages with her within the very real confines of her earthly existence. This duality allows Bai to present themes in her work that are definitely bridged across the centuries—from her 16th to ours—without losing the essence of the metaphysical.

The bhajans she sings serve as a format for dialogue between the states of being bound by time and those of being free from its constraints. Her bhajans depict this state of "timelessness," discounting worldly existence by insisting that the soul ought to be eternally enraptured in a state of devotion, or bhakti. Mira Bai's devotional songs— translations hardly do justice to them in terms of their original evocative quality, musicality, and beauty—speak to the power of love to overcome the limitations of time and the mortal body that we perceive as true while in it. In Mira's view, Krishna embodies both eternal love and the ultimate reality. She sees love for him as an example of devotion that transcends time, and she considers this love a model for achieving the kind of unbreakable bond with the divine that any serious spiritual seeker might hope to attain:

पिय बिन सूनो छै म्हारो देस ।।
ऐसो है कोई पिवकूँ मिलावै
तन मन क करूँ सब पेस ।
तेरे कारण बन बन डोलूँ
कर जोगणको भेस ।।

Without the Dear One, my home is a void,
Does there dwell someone who would take me to my Lord?
On such a one, my body and soul I shall bestow.
For his sake, I wander from forest to forest,
Adopting the Yogi's dress. (Behari, 111)

Not only does Mira Bai portray Krishna as a deity, but she also presents him as something much more—something profoundly more important to the lives of humans. For Mira, and for millions of others like her, Krishna embodies the essence of divine love that transcends individual experiences and embraces the whole universe. That is why, for followers of Krishna, love acts as a link between the human and the divine, uniting them with Krishna in a way that rightly matters—a way that grants them access to divine favor and fills their lives with joy and happiness. Mira Bai's path teaches us that true devotion to Krishna requires both love and trust. Once we have those two things, we are perfectly positioned to enter into a state of blissful oneness with Krishna.

Mira Bai takes her intimate devotion to Krishna and turns it into something that has the potential to resonate with all readers everywhere, for all time. In her poetry, Krishna becomes a symbol of something much larger—of divine love that exists not just in her personal experience but in every moment and space of life. In Mira's work, love is the bridge that connects

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the poet, single and seemingly isolated, to the cosmos—infinite and containing every kind of love. When one reads her lines, it is impossible not to feel a kind of cosmic devotion that connects all life.

राम-नाम-रस पीजै।

मनवा! राम-नाम-रस पीजै।

तजि कुसंग सतसंग बैठि नित, हरि-चर्चा सुणि लीजै।

काम क्रोध मद मोह लोभ कूं, चित से बाहय दीजै।

मीरा के प्रभु गिरधर नागर, ता के रंग में भीजै।

Drink thou, the nectar of the holy name Ram,
O mind, drink thou the nectar of the holy name.
Abandon thou evil company, associate with the saints at all times.
And hear thou the discourses of the Lord.
From the mind turn thou all
Lust, anger, and passions.
Mira's Lord is Girdhar Nagar,
In His dye is she dyed. (Behari, 141)

CONCLUSION

Mira Bai's bhajans have profound and extensive significance in the spiritual and philosophical discourses in which they are placed. They appear to have attained an almost insubstantial quality that enables them to float timelessly and placelessly throughout various cultures. This study makes plain that Mira's poetry is not simply the frilly devotional expression of a woman "lost in love with her God," as some may initially interpret it. On the contrary, this study demonstrates—verse by verse in actual performance and in light of the historical context of both Bhakti poetry and the particularities of Mira's life and times—that her work indeed is a potent form of theoretical speculation about existence, love, and liberation.

Mira's bhajans challenge established traditions and encourage spiritual seekers to reflect on their own paths, filtering them through the experiences that Mira herself had. Not only does this allow her to connect with a kind of spiritual seeker that one would typically think of as relevant for her era, but it incidentally connects her to a wide variety of people across a lot of different cultures and times—seemingly anyone who might be looking for a bit of deeper understanding and fulfilment in their lives.

The true importance of this study is that it recasts the devotional songs of Mira Bai as profound texts teeming with wisdom about the individual and universal interplay. These richly metaphoric songs—many using the poetics of traditional riddle form—examine Mira's nature in relationship to the cosmos. They might even be said to invite examination of the nature of each of our individual selves. They certainly open up a wondrous realm of opportunity for engaging with Mira's poetry and ongoing conversation about the profound wisdom embedded within it.

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