

## Mirabai

During the time of the medieval period (500CE to 1500CE), many *bhakti* or devotional groups in Hinduism develop. Several of these *bhakti* movements focus on the worship of Visnu, Siva and Devi. The notion of *bhakti* can be described as a “loving devotion to God” (Stutley 163). The concept can also be defined as something that “signifies the self surrender of human beings to a personal god of love, who is also to be worshipped with love and adoration” (Chaudhuri 256). One of its common features is having a strong sense of emotionalism. In addition, many of the practices that are associated with *bhakti* are “choral singing [as] a form of worship” along with “processing with drums and cymbals” (256).

Devotion to Krsna emerges as one of the most popular devotional cults in Hinduism. According to the mystical cults that focus their worship on Krsna, Krsna is a being that represents both God and man. This belief comes from the notion of Krsna being the reincarnated human form of the god, Visnu. Devotional followers are drawn to Krsna because of “his beauty, kindness and personal magnetism, as well as his overwhelming affection for all living creatures” (Stutley 91). These are the main attributes that “encourage lesser beings to strive for perfection and liberation.” (91) In addition, “devotees can share in the blissful experience of Radha and Krishna in sexual union by playing the role of friends of the divine couple.” (Olson 232)

One of the most well known devotees of Krsna is Mirabai. From what historical sources and legends have told us, she was a female poet from the medieval period. She was born

around 1498 and died around 1573CE. This time period places her around the time when *bhakti* cults began to arise. For instance in Carl Olson's, *Hindu Primary Sources*, it mentions that "the sixteenth-century poet Mirabai was a female poet with wide popularity, a Rajput princess who rejected her earthly husband for her genuine spouse, Krishna." (231) She is not just known as being a famous poetess, but is also regarded as a princess, mystic and saint. It is important to note that the story of her life is known more through legend rather than through historical fact. From what legends can tell us, she received a doll or idol of Krsna as a young child. Receiving this idol may have inspired her to begin *bhakti* practice towards Krsna. As she began her new found devotion to Krsna, her family worshipped Visnu as their primary deity. From an early moment in life, Mirabai regarded Krishna as her true spiritual husband. In addition, "Mirabai did not execute her social duties, but rather spent her time associating with wandering holy people, who were devoted to her own secret husband Krishna." (231) Nevertheless, she did fulfill her most important rite of passage in Hinduism, *vivaha* or marriage. From what we are told, she married a Rajput prince at a young age. Before the age of twenty four, she lost her husband as well as her father, father-in-law and grandfather. It was these losses that "made her turn to religion in the specific form of Vaishnavism" (Chaudhuri 291). From this point onwards, Mirabai's life changed as she began to ignore or 'give up' her traditional roles as a woman. For instance, following the death of her husband, she was expected to commit the act of *sati*. Her husband's family were shocked that she did not burn herself alive upon her husband's funeral pyre. These 'disobediences' of Mirabai gave her husband's family the excuse to make Mirabai's life a world of torment. In the end, "she left

home and became a wandering ascetic; at the end of her life, she is said to have merged with the icon of Krishna in a temple.” (Olson 232)

From the time of Mirabai’s husband’s death, Mirabai began full devotional worship of Krsna. What is also important to mention is that she considered herself to be the spouse of Krsna. She felt more close to her spiritual husband than her actual husband. Mirabai, as well as “a great many women, who have never found love of any kind in life, have thought of both husband and God in this way” (Chaudhuri 292). From this point she began to compose many poems and songs of worship in which “she became famous for [her songs] which [were] sung all over northern India by those who worship Krsna in a truly religious spirit” (Chaudhuri 291). Olson also points out that “her poems are often defiant in tone, and they exhibit the illicit love between the blue god and his *gopis*, who abandon their husbands and family due to their love of the deity.” (Olson 232) In addition she not only became famous for her enthusiastic devotion but also became famous from the amount of poems that she wrote as well as the amount of poems that have been attributed to her. For instance about 200 to 400 poems are accepted by scholars as being written by Mirabai, while 800-1000 poems have been attributed to her. In addition, her poems initiated a mode of singing.

Many women have looked at Mirabai’s love for Krsna through her poems and have developed a sense of devotion in order to feel a stronger sense of control over their own lives instead of letting their families control their lives. It is these cases “in which human love and divine love come so close to each other that they are not distinguishable, for both partake of divinity as well as humanity” (293). In addition, Mirabai’s life shows that “this kind of love in

which a woman can feel either for God or husband rises to the spiritual without taking off its feet from the physical base” (291-292).

Another important element that is seen in the *bhakti* movements is the notion of ignoring gender, class, caste and religious boundaries. These were the expectations that Mirabai chose to ignore in order for her to pursue her devotion to Krsna. Instead of fulfilling the expected norms of a widow she began her spiritual practice by becoming a sort of *samnyasin* or renouncer. From what is known, she left her husband’s family as well as her own and spent the last years of her life in Vrindivan which is a holy area in India that is a center of worship of Krsna.

#### Works Cited

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This article was written by Cynthia Lambert, who takes full responsibility for the content.