

Letter from Mumbai

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Some time ago, my mother-in-law gifted me a book of poetry by Mira, a sixteenth-century bhakti saint of North India. *Mira, The Divine Lover* was her edition of the poetry, a 1996 publication by a spiritual organization “based on the teachings of all religions.” Knowing that my mother-in-law is a resolute believer in the idea that all religions are essentially “different paths up the same mountain” – perhaps due to the shadow cast by the modern monk Swami Vivekananda and his landmark introduction of Hinduism to Western audiences – her gift of bhakti poetry did not surprise me. She herself comes at the religious life through a varied and contradictory background, being an Iyengar married to a Swakula-Sali and devotee of the modern guru Shirdi Sai Baba.

Mira, too, was devotee – an exemplary bhakta. She is one of a galaxy of bhakti poets whose direct divine encounters are said to have been captured by verse, and thousands of devotional poems in passionate praise of Lord Krishna are attributed to her. Originally composed as songs, her verses are still sung by saints and laity today.

In ‘Mira is Steadfast,’ she says:

I have torn off the veil of worldly shame;
Only the company of Saints is dear to me. [...]
My master has revealed to me
The mirror within my own body;
Now I'll sing and dance in ecstasy. [...]
Mira, unadorned and unbedecked,
Roams intoxicated in the Lord's love.

Born and bred in Auckland, I have come to India for the first time with my husband and in-laws for a family wedding. “It’s just like Sandringham when I was growing up,” I tell them with tongue-in-cheek,

although I certainly feel like a stranger to the crowds once we have left the family festivities in Hyderabad. I think nothing of Mira when we arrive in Mumbai.

Fabled City,
Cloaked in the brown haze of summer,
Crowds through the boulevards, so many,

Biblical figures with LED halos, “Jesus Enterprises” selling snacks, prayer rooms in shopping malls, nightlights and lampshades of saints and gurus. A citizenry of cows roaming freely...

In amongst the villages of stopgap housing and skyscrapers of new capital, we find hole-in-the-wall temples and roadside shrines, rush hour congregations spilling out into the street: a spatial and social labyrinth that is equal parts glossy and chaotic. For a time, it was India’s grand threshold city: the country’s most liberal, economically vibrant and multicultural metropolis. We take tens of photos outside the Gateway of India, a monument intended to commemorate the visit of King George V and Queen Mary but which is now remembered as the place where the last troops of empire departed.

In many ways, Mira’s devotional poetry is a strange introduction to India, and most especially, Mumbai. Perhaps I would have been better off watching *Dhobi Ghat*, a 2011 Bollywood film that follows four characters from different classes across the metropolis, or the 2013 film *The Lunchbox*, which follows its namesake through the city’s dabbawala networks. I could have read any number of the books that this self-mythologizing “city of dreams” has inspired: *Mumbai Fables*, *Maximum City*, *Bombay After Dark*, *Bombay by Night*, *Shantaram*, *Family Matters*, *Beautiful Thing*, *Dongri to Dubai*, *Love and Longing in Bombay*...

But, somehow, it is manifestations of the religious that intrigue me the most. Even without a “yoga retreat” tourist visa, that new-age stamp of the dubious foreigner (and one of India’s top three visitor categories), I am covertly hoping to understand something of Mumbai’s religious life. Is the idea of the contemporary traveller, I reflect, just a veneer for that older form of religious enquiry – that of the wayfarer, the pilgrim? Must all travellers be secretly seeking alteration by things fascinating and unrelatable?

Outside the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (once known as the Prince of Wales Museum), we find a gigantic Buddha head, lying in the grass as if decapitated from a reclining statue. The sculpture is called ‘Zen Space,’ and in front are two retired cannons and an entryway flanked by guards. Inside, devotees of the Buddha meditate before archaeological displays. Further across the city,

Hindu nationalist forces (the “cow klux clan”) busy themselves changing street signs and rewriting textbooks. I think then of the poetry of Mira.

Said to be unique in her simplicity and unadorned fervour, her life and verse was invisible to the powers of its time. Despite having been born into a noble family of Rajasthan, and married into another ruling house, she bore no children and took no disciples, and little is written of her by historians. What we do know of Mira is through the legends of those who have sung her songs – many of which have themselves been changed and mixed through oral tradition. Her spiritual master, as her poetry declares, was the saint Raidas – a Dalit and a cobbler – and her association with him caused no end of distress to her in-laws and the Brahmanical order the palace followed:

Like a boat sailing
On the high seas
The lures of the shore
Hold no charm for me. [...]
When Raidas, the perfect Master, I met
The severed twig joined again the tree.

At night in the TV system of our rundown art deco hotel (The Bentley), we enter the forests of old where saints have dwelt. This is the version of India that Mira and her poetry belong to in the popular imaginary: a premodern rural world that is ritually exoticized in films and television shows. It is all sarus cranes flying across rice paddies; copper pots of ghee; humble shrines under the shade of banyan trees; sojourners, hermits, and householders devoted to their own dharma; mountains where peacocks cry; riverbanks with reeds and vines; deer dotted brown on sacred peaks; leaf-thatched huts where the forests spread out alive with cooing birds; temples splendid hidden by dark trees; and deities: Shiva, Lord of the stalactite, of the third eye and rimed beard, meditating on his tiger skin rug. In this lush and oversaturated India, mythologized as the authentic religious epoch, Mira’s image of a decorated bride ready to meet her beloved god has its place:

In the high tower with the bright red gate,
Beyond the three attributes is laid my bed. [...]
I’m adorned with ornaments bright and rare
My forehead glows with the mark of vermillion,
My hands lovingly hold the salver of simran;
Thus I am bedecked and my radiance grows.

Mira and her constellation of contemporaries, it is asserted, represent India's true religion: a centuries old tradition of Hinduism that is available to all castes and practiced in all vernaculars. But by the same set of powers, Mira is more a folkloric reconstruction that betrays present-day national interests than a historically-accurate product of medieval North India. It's hard to say whether her work has stayed with me because I believe in this narrative of authenticity, or whether it has stayed with me because of the contrast between her unbounded religious conviction and my own tentative reading.

The next day, we stand in line at a nearby temple in a crowded bottleneck. With its metal detectors, bag searches and heavy queue policed by a series of snaking barriers, the temple combines the impression of customs and Rainbow's End all at once. Inside, the priests take each devotee's offerings for the altar with the same enthusiasm of fast-food checkout workers putting burgers on a tray. As I hand my giant pink lotus over the railings, I remember Mira's declaration: "As the lotus stalk lives within the water,/So do I ever dwell in you, O Lord." Where is this deity to whom she dedicates herself? The cowherd, the dark one, the mountain-holder?

All those times that I sat in pujas – at homes in Sandringham; in Morningside; at the temple in Papakura; even at my own wedding – staring at mango-shaped candles and sandalwood paste figurines, listening to devotees chanting or singing, and my mother-in-law had asked me, "What do you think about all this? The puja – what we are doing here?" I wanted to say that I didn't know... I really don't know what we're doing. Where are these gods to whom we speak? A god capable of compelling Mira to write, "the fire of my burning heart, pray quench/For Thou with lotus eyes my heart did wrench"?

In the nineteenth century, European intellectuals theorized that with the advent of modernity, the self would be autonomous and God would be dead. The death of God, David Smith chronicles in his account of *Hinduism and Modernity*, would be "the inescapable 'fact' of modern life." Religion was everywhere an invention by those who sought in the sky the force they lacked themselves, and brought it down in terror. Discovering the ultimate profanity of all things would result in a radical disenchantment. Railways would lead to an industrialization that would be "the greatest missionary of all," overturning prejudices, uprooting habits, and changing long-observed customs. What was previously the domain of religion would become the domain of capital, with commodities being consecrated by the social relations that engendered them. Entrances to arcades would be the new threshold of the dream world. And nowhere would this be more acute than in the city. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* provided the definitive modernist exposition of the city in English:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

When the world was charged with the grandeur of God, Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, it flamed out like shining from shook foil. But then – as Amiri Baraka would later say – He was replaced with respectability and air-conditioning. What now of life outside hygienic sanitation systems and regulated commercial activity and insurance packages and career progression counselling and the tyranny of the individual to choose their own combo meal? “Desacralization has pervaded the entire experience of the nonreligious man of modern societies,” the historian of religion Mircea Eliade claimed, “and in consequence, he finds it increasingly difficult to rediscover the existential dimensions of the religious man of [other] societies.”

Mira, divine lover, where now is your god? The lotus-eyed one with the peacock-feathered crest? The herdsman, the enchanter, the prince among peers? Might I find him here, in the temples and museums of Mumbai; must I seek in the library, in conversation? Or does true understanding first require that knowledge be transformed into ignorance, the theology of concepts into contemplation, and dogmas into ineffable mysteries? If the search for transformation is the traveller’s lot, then the mode of enquiry must be experiential.

But perhaps it is by the same turn of hand that the traveller is the sightless one, the one that Mira criticised for meandering from holy place to holy place: “Man, without realizing his true self,/Roams now to Mathura, now to Kashi.” For the god she describes is near, even as she casts herself the tearful lover that longs for his union. It is a god that exists already within her and her satsang, the community of saints. Although the ardour and anguish she expresses might make her devotion to Krishna appear as an individualized spiritual path, her devotion is also unquestionably communal:

The Saints alone are my dear ones;
I belong to them, my very life are they.
Mira remains merged in the Saints’ company,
As butter abides within milk.

Bhakti practices, the writer John Stratton Hawley clarifies in *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement*, may seem to the outsider a “personal monotheism,” but in reality, they depend on a “heartfelt, intrinsically social sense of connectedness that emerges in the worshipper.” It is not a god that one finds as much as a god that is occasioned within and among community, enthusiasm, and song. A traveller might be able to observe the bhaktas as she passes by, but to observe their gods, she must belong.