

Krishna P. Bahadur, *Mīrā Bāī and her Padas*. Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1998. pp. xviii, 115.

Continuing his extraordinary progress through pre-modern Hindi literature, large swathes of which have been published in his English versions, K.P. Bahadur now turns to Mīrā Bāī. Various factors contrive to make Mīrā one of the very hardest devotional voices and characters to represent adequately to a readership in the English language. Everywhere there is vagueness and uncertainty: the structure and detail of Mīrā's received biography rests on the shakiest of hagiographic foundations, while the number and content of compositions ascribed to her differs widely amongst a number of confused and confusing recensions. Even her language is problematic: sometimes her verses come to us in something like the sixteenth-century Rajasthani that must presumably have been her mother-tongue; but sometimes they pick up Gujarati features, or are assimilated to the mainstream Braj Bhasha dialect in which contemporaries such as Sūrdās composed. A rigorous academic assessment of such matters is unlikely to appeal to a general readership; and yet the dubious historiography of the *bhakti* tradition is equally unsatisfying to those who would like to know who Mīrā was, when she lived, and how she achieved such an exalted position in the crowded hall of devotional fame. Many an appetite for such knowledge must have been whetted by the representations of Mīrā in popular films; and indeed it is hard to read the words '*mere to giridhara gopāla*' without hearing in the mind's ear the sublimely intoxicating tones of M.S. Subbulaxmi, whose filmic representation of Mīrā did so much to cement the beautiful, inspirational (but of course utterly ahistorical) modern image of Mīrā half a century ago. There is therefore a double problem here: how to write about history except historically, and how to write about piety except piously. Even this formulation begs the question as to whether Mīrā's lasting importance is as a religious figure or a literary one: is she a devotee or a poet? The clumsy formulation 'poet-saint' declares that she is both, but this is cold comfort to any hapless author who attempts to represent Mīrā to a modern, English-speaking world.

Bahadur approaches Mīrā through a process of compromise that has gradually become established as the accepted way of dealing with the uncertainties outlined above. That is, some of the approved research techniques of Indology are brought to bear on the subject, hedging (some) words about with diacritical spellings and attempting some kind of assessment of evidence in the light of objective historical analysis; but when

such processes fail to yield a full or satisfying picture, the blanks are painted in with colours borrowed from a palette of legends and fables. Gross misrepresentations of chronology, such as the legend that has Mīrā joining the long queue of visitors at Akbar's court (he was an infant at the assumed time of her death in 1546) are set aside; but other 'facts', though no better founded, are allowed to stand. As W.H. McLeod has commented in the context of Sikh biographies, this logic represents a very dubious cultural equation, namely that hagiography minus the accretions of legend equals historicity. Bahadur's opinion is that 'One can't discard legend and tradition in the lives of saints, particularly when historical evidence is lacking, or is of a conflicting nature'. (p. 17) Can't one? Perhaps not: natural curiosity about a character such as Mīrā abhors a vacuum, and if Bahadur had restricted himself to verifiable historical information, his introduction would have been short enough to print on a postcard. But even taking such difficulties into account, his references and the baker's dozen of items constituting his tiny bibliography do reveal some alarming features: Tod is still a favoured source, while none of the relevant Mīrā research of recent decades seems to have been consulted at all.

Bahadur's introduction, some forty pages in length, gives an account of Mīrā's historical context, and discusses the content and conventions of her poetry. While objective historical discourse is attempted, and 'obnoxious Hindu practice[s]' such as suttee are condemned, we are left in little doubt that it was the 'Moslem invaders' who provided late medieval India with its bad guys. The reason for the successes of Muslim encroachments in the early part of the sixteenth century was that the Hindus 'were busy building fabulous temples, most of which were ransacked by the invaders'. But no less fabulous are the various allegations in the traditional sources about Mīrā's life, background, character, and about the origins and significance of her name. Bahadur's view of these problematic matters is somewhat like Yashoda's view of the infant Krishna – occasional glimpses of an underlying complex reality do not impinge much on a preferred simplistic perception in terms that are much easier to comprehend. In all honesty, we have to admit that unless we don the credulous spectacles of the faithful we simply do not know much about Mīrā; even the background to her name (or 'Christian name', as Bahadur has it on p. 12) remains something of a mystery. Ultimately, the question of who Mīrā was can only be answered in the traditional manner, namely by reading between the lines of the scant and cryptic internal references in the poetry ascribed to her.

The main section of this book comprises 81 *padas*, presented in roman transliteration (but with Nagari *daṇḍa* punctuation!) followed by annotated English translations. Given Bahadur's own earlier discussion of the problem of Mīrā's corpus, and his brief statement on the internal variety that distinguishes the five published collections to which he refers, it is disappointing to be left entirely in the dark about his own criteria of selection. He merely tells us that 'this collection of eighty-one of Mīrā's *padas* aims at giving the best of these recensions' (p. 39): quite what that means is anyone's guess. We have no clue as to the status or history of the texts he gives us.

In respect of the translations, readers familiar with Bahadur's earlier published work will find a familiar format in this book: the English versions of the poems are arranged as free verse, with some kind of (random?) structural variation brought in through the indenting of certain sequences of lines; some verses bear a contextualising heading, such as 'What Mīrā said to her companion'. The translations are maximal and expansive, adding words or phrases here and there to flesh out the tightly-constructed, minimalist originals. Readers seeking an introduction to the content of typical Mīrā *padas* will find it here; but those hoping to be given a feeling for the specificity of Mīrā's voice will not be satisfied, for the immediacy of Mīrā's passion and anguish is famously difficult to catch in translation, and has not survived at all well in these versions. Consequently it is hard for the reader of the English to distinguish Mīrā from a hundred other devotional poets of her period. There is often a problem of register, with the measured (if impassioned) wording of the originals tending to be represented uncomfortably in clumsily-handled English idiom whose contemporary tone smacks of the banal and sits ill with the parallel use of archaisms intended to give the text a period flavour. Descriptive passages are quite well managed; but those phrases dealing with the all-important sense of relationship so characteristic of Mīrā's lyrics too frequently misfire. Many of the translations, nonetheless, work well enough in their own terms. Rhyme or pararhyme is used occasionally (despite the introduction's statement to the contrary), but sparingly. The very tight layout of the text on the page does little service to either the original or the translations, which run on helter-skelter without a break. Publishers should realise that poems are not listings in a telephone directory – they need space to breathe.

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