



# *Songs of the Saints of India*

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form—in earlier publications, and we are grateful for permission to draw upon them here. The books are as follows: Ainslie T. Embree, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); John Stratton Hawley, *Krishna, the Butter Thief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) and *Sūr Dās: Poet, Singer, Saint* (Seattle: University of Washington Press and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Caroline Walker Bynum, Steven Harrell, and Paula Richman, eds., *Gender and Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

Finally, a word is in order to explain which of us did what. For years we have worked together as mutual editors—Hawley for prose and Juergensmeyer for poetry—and this volume grew out of that collaboration. We decided to expand our efforts from Surdas to his medieval poet-peers, and we did some of the field research as a team, discussing the shape and content of the book at various stages. Ultimately it was Hawley who wrote the prose portions of the book; we did the poems together. Typically, Juergensmeyer worked “from the ground up” on the basis of a literal translation provided by Hawley, though Hawley’s verse translation is in the background on several occasions. Then, of course, we argued about the whole thing, not just the poetry but the prose as well. Each of us happily acknowledges the other’s sometimes irksome help in a friendship that is now many years old.

This book is dedicated to Ainslie Embree, a friend to both of us and to India in ways too numerous to record.

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J.S.H.  
M.J.

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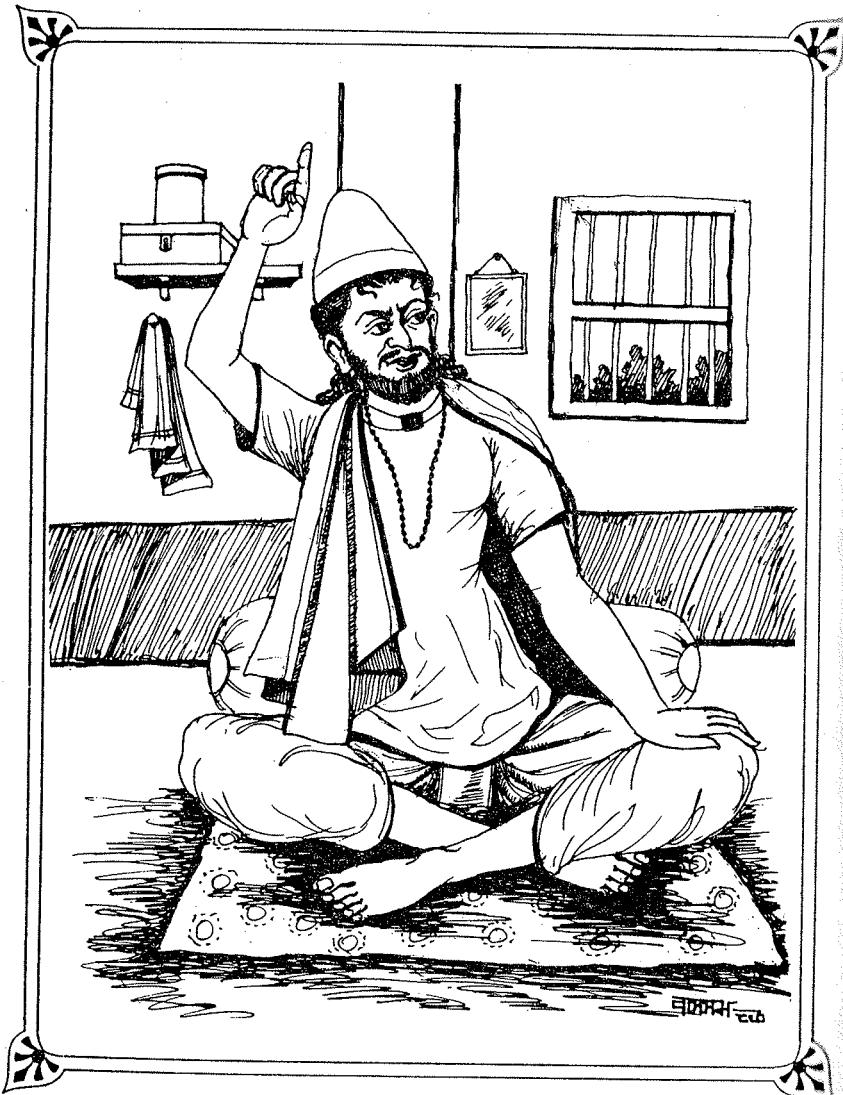
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## TWO

# *Kabir*

*Brother, if holding back your seed  
Earned you a place in paradise,  
eunuchs would be the first to arrive.*

**I**N the whole sweep of north Indian religion there is no voice more stringent, more passionate, more confident than that of Kabir. If Hinduism has a prophet, an Amos or a Jeremiah, here he is—not in the sense that he forecast anything, but that he was ever at odds with the world around him, always ready to fling the dart of criticism in the direction of established religion. This cannot have endeared him to the slickly robed, nicely perfumed Muslim *qazis* who expounded matters of Muslim law in the mosques and courts of a Benares ruled by sultans of Turkish ancestry. Nor can it have earned him the affection of the argumentative, supercilious Brahmin pundits with whom they coexisted. And it had no chance of making him a great favorite among the sometimes dignified, sometimes unkempt yogis who filled the city with their message of renunciation, then as now. But his testy aphorisms did ensure that the common people would take in what he said—storekeepers, fishermen, housewives, and rickshaw drivers—and his words are on their tongues to this day.

Here is Kabir on things dear to Hindus:

Vedas, Puranas—why read them?  
It's like loading an ass with sandalwood!

As for Muslim priorities, such as the necessity of circumcision:

If God had wanted to make me a Muslim,  
why didn't he make the incision?

Or the practices of naked mendicants:

If the union yogis seek  
Came from roaming around in the buff,  
every deer in the forest would be saved.

Then there are his numerous reflections on life:

Your chance of human birth  
Doesn't come time and again.  
Once the ripe fruit falls  
You can't stick it back  
on the branch.

And on death:

Bones: they burn like tinder  
Hair: it burns like hay.  
And still, says Kabir, people won't wake up—  
Not until they feel death's club  
inside their skulls.

### The Hagiography of Kabir

As in the case of Ravidas, we know very little with historical certainty about the life that produced attacks and meditations such as these. Kabir's name is a Muslim one, a Quranic title of Allah meaning "great," but in poems of his that have the best claim to authenticity one finds little to suggest that Kabir was a Muslim in the usual sense of the word. He criticized Islam rather than embracing it, and evidently had little appreciation for the niceties of Islamic theology. He seems more at home with Hindu ways, though they too receive his criticism, and there has been some speculation of late that he came from a social group that had recently and superficially converted to Islam.<sup>1</sup> Such a picture would fit well with his social station as it is described both in legend and in poems attributed to him. Apparently

he belonged to the weaver (*julaha, kori*) caste, which had every reason to disown its lowly place in the caste hierarchy and turn to Islam. Beyond that there is little one can say, except that poetry and hagiography are united in asserting that Kabir's weavers were from Benares.

For centuries the weavers of Benares have beautified the streets and open places of the city with their work. People come from all over India to buy the richly woven, gold- and silver-bordered saris of Benares, and the production of these garments is one of its visual joys. Early in the morning these weavers, most of whom are Muslim, bring great skeins of brightly dyed thread and stretch them out to dry on racks, a hundred yards at a time. And if one passes through one of the weavers' neighborhoods, the aural pleasure is scarcely less intense. Behind courtyard walls and under open porches, the men sit at their looms skittering the shuttles back and forth across long, taut threads in a strangely addicting rhythm. Often they sing as they go. It is an occupation that gives one time to reflect on the noisy happenings that fill the city's twisted streets, and Kabir evidently did plenty of reflecting. His biographies and his own compositions suggest that his thoughts often got him so agitated that he couldn't sit still, so he jumped up and joined the fray.

It is easy to imagine that Kabir's tendency to get involved in debates about religion took him away from his loom more frequently than was good for the family's financial health, and this is affirmed in Priyadas's commentary on the *Bhaktamal*, which gives one of the oldest extant accounts of Kabir's life, as of Ravidas's.<sup>2</sup> But the reason for this state of affairs is quite different from what one might expect on the basis of the spicy, obdurate personality that emerges from the poems we have already quoted. In suggesting why Kabir's business habitually lost money, Priyadas seems eager to soften Kabir and make him conform to the kindly, abstracted type that lies at the core of Priyadas's own vision of sainthood. Part of the problem, says Priyadas, was that Kabir would often drift off into meditation as he worked; and even if he went to market to hawk a bolt of cloth, he would very likely be overcome with a wave of generosity and give the whole thing away to some needy beggar. Priyadas reports that once when this happened Kabir became so frightened of the reception he would get if he returned home that he simply did not go. He hid in the market for three days, while his

family languished in hunger. In the end it all came out for the better. Enunciating a theme that is one of his favorites, Priyadas says that God responded to Kabir's unstinting generosity to others by sending an ox-cart full of provisions to his family.<sup>3</sup> But in recounting the event, he takes a moment to note that even when this great boon arrived at the door, Kabir's mother was not pleased. She suspected that someday they would be punished for accepting this unearned beneficence, and shouted at the merchant who delivered it to go away.

The story then develops into an account of how the saint's generosity and devotional charisma drew to him great crowds of followers, including even royalty. As usual in Priyadas's hagiographical portraits, this popularity provokes anger and jealousy among Brahmins, who feel that their influence is being eroded and their position displaced—the sort of feeling that inflamed them against Ravidas. In this case they are able to win the allegiance of Kabir's disgruntled mother, who joins them in complaining of the great pain he has caused to all.<sup>4</sup> In an effort to bring him to trial, the Brahmins take Kabir before the emperor Sikandar Lodi, who is said to have been visiting Benares from Delhi at the time. The *qazi* of Sikandar's court orders Kabir to bow before the potentate, but Kabir refuses, saying that he only knows how to bow to God. That is enough for the emperor to decree that Kabir be bound in chains and thrown in the middle of the Ganges, to be drowned. The order is carried out, but when the emperor's men return to the shore they find Kabir standing unharmed on the bank. (The cover of a modern comic book depicting Kabir's life shows him walking across the water to get there.)<sup>5</sup> Suspecting that witchcraft is involved, the soldiers place his body on a nearby funeral pyre. Then they ignite the pyre, but all that happens is that the body emits a luscious golden glow: the saint remains unhurt. These events are soon told at court, and it is not long before Kabir can number among his devotees the most powerful ruler in India.

Nothing, however, can placate the Brahmins. Having failed to win the ear of royalty, they resort to efforts to organize Kabir's own people against him. They invite Untouchables near and far to attend an elaborate feast at Kabir's house, expecting that there will be a great riot when the rabble arrive and find nothing to eat. As on former occasions Kabir, sensing the imminent press of a crowd, goes

into hiding. But his patron, God himself, steps in to fill the breach, taking human form in the likeness of Kabir and tending to the guests' every need.<sup>6</sup> Thus the Brahmins' evil plans are foiled again; and again, as in the case of Queen Jhali of Cittor, it is in the gustatory arena that they meet defeat. Evidently Priyadas loves this theme: perhaps it is his commentary on the legendary appetites of Brahmins, whose traditional livelihood depends so much on food offerings paid for by members of other castes.

The end of Kabir's life is told in a surprisingly economical fashion, compared with the attention it has received almost everywhere else. Priyadas merely says that Kabir retired from Benares to live in the small town of Magahar, some miles to the north, near Gorakhpur. When he sensed that his death was at hand, he asked for some flowers, spread them out as a bed, and merged forever into the infinite love of God.<sup>7</sup>

This peaceful departure is not quite what the larger tradition reports. It is more usually said that Kabir's death was witnessed by great throngs of people, among whom could be found equal numbers of Hindus and Muslims. When the great saint finally passed away, these two camps set upon each other with brilliant fury, each trying to lay claim to the body. But their warfare was useless. After battling one another to get to the corpse, they found in its stead only a pile of flowers—or, according to another version, two piles of flowers. A voice from heaven—was it Kabir himself?—advised the Muslims present to bury one pile, as was their practice, and told the Hindus to cremate the other, as was their wont.<sup>8</sup> Either the purpose of this story is to show that religious practice, whether Hindu or Muslim, falls short of Kabir's reality or it is to present Kabir, in the words of a subtitle of a recently published book, as "the apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity."<sup>9</sup> Either way the crowd's response to his death serves as a prime example of the way people fail to hear the prophet's message that God is one.

Perhaps inevitably, Kabir's loving biographers have proven themselves not much better than the two bellicose crowds at accepting Kabir on his own terms. Priyadas, for example, makes a great point of Kabir's timidity, how shy he was before masses of people. But what we hear in the poet's own utterances seems to prove the opposite: he was pugilistic in the extreme, ever on the attack, and unwilling to let the opponent get a word in edgewise:

Pundit, how can you be so dumb?  
 You're going to drown, along with all your kin;  
 unless you start speaking of Ram.

Hey Qazi,  
 what's that book you're preaching from?  
 And reading, reading—how many days?  
 Still you haven't mastered one word.<sup>10</sup>

Priyadas also stresses the importance Kabir attached to being hospitable toward others in the *bhakti* community, but do these words sound hospitable?

Hey brother, why do you want me to talk?  
 Talk and talk and the real things get lost.<sup>11</sup>

If anything is credible in Priyadas's account of Kabir, perhaps it is the emphasis he lays on the saint's outlandish behavior and the embarrassment and grief it must have caused his mother. According to one story he dragged a prostitute around with him to keep away the pious throngs, and it is easy enough to imagine that he also scandalized his mother, if in somewhat less inflammatory ways.<sup>12</sup>

As for the incident of the flowers at Magahar, it too assumes an air of well-meaning unreality when one compares the story with what the poet himself had to say about Magahar. In poems that stand a good chance of being authentic, he makes it clear that it was hardly the urge to make peace between Hindus and Muslims that drew him to the town. He seems to have gone there strictly for Hindu—or rather, anti-Hindu—reasons, for he makes quite a point of setting Magahar on the same level as Benares. To the ears of any Hindu, that is a very demeaning comparison for Benares, and one strong tradition affirms that Kabir left the holy city deliberately lest he die there and appear to accept the notion that it had eternal benefits to confer.<sup>13</sup> There is little cause to doubt the unanimous testimony of tradition that Kabir decided to live his last years among the weavers of Magahar, and if he did, it was hardly a gesture of conciliation toward Hindus.

The irenic doctrine that Kabir was the great spokesman for Hindu-Muslim reconciliation is certainly a convenient article of faith in secular India, and one that finds eloquent expression in the identical

twin buildings that have been constructed on his death site: a Hindu temple and a Muslim mausoleum. But the doctrine finds little support in the poetry itself. Nowhere in Kabir's sayings does he evince much of an attitude of acceptance toward the two great faiths of India. The only pronouncements that would lead one to believe that these religions are fundamentally the same are those in which they are denigrated in the same breath.

If the mosque is the place where God resides,  
 then who owns the rest of the land?  
 Ram lives in images and holy locations?—  
 Then why has no one ever found him there?

Hindus, Muslims—where did they come from?  
 Who got them started down this road?

### The Exemplar of *Nirguna* Religion

Kabir's uniform disdain for Hinduism and Islam reflects his most deeply held conviction: that God cannot be named, described, assumed, or bound. Kabir is sensitive to the many ways in which life's truth escapes the lazy hypocrisies in which we prefer to trade: it is often encountered only as a challenge to what we expect, only in conditions of extreme loneliness and death, only in silence or surprise, and with effort and cost. These are the themes that Kabir dwells on time and again, and they shape the way he expresses himself. He has no interest in becoming a new, "prophetic" version of the chattering, dogmatic *qazis* and pundits that he hears all around him, so he often speaks in feints and jabs. And when he goes on at greater length, it may be simply to confound listeners who come hoping to learn the sort of religious truth one can write down and file away. These confusing utterances are called Kabir's "upside-down speech" (*ulatbansi*) because they defy comprehension:

Child of a childless woman,  
 a fatherless son,  
 someone without feet who climbs trees. . . .<sup>15</sup>

As for his other formulations, they have a tendency to be so short

and trenchant, so earthy, that they scarcely qualify as "religious" discourse at all. From Kabir's point of view, that's fine.

The religion he knows—if religion it is—is of a totally different order from the admonitions and assurances that put bread and butter on the tables of *gazis* and pundits. His faith is the sort traditionally known as the "qualityless" or "formless" (*nirguna*) brand of *bhakti*. It lacks quality or form in two respects. First, its proponents insist that God is not the sort of reality that one can speak of and conceptualize, certainly not the sort one can see. God is not an object, but lies closer to us than our acts of language and symbolic organization permit us to view, and closer to life than the limitations of our own brief and flawed existences allow us to comprehend. If we come upon God, therefore, or God comes upon us, the moment is apt to have a simple, easy feel to it, at once empty and full—what Kabir calls, following a substantial tradition before him, "spontaneous" (*sahaj*).<sup>16</sup> Here is the experience in major and minor keys:

Kabir:  
 My mind was soothed  
 When I found the boundless knowledge,  
 And the fires  
 that scorch the world  
 To me are water cool.

---

Kabir:  
 The instrument is still,  
 Its strings snapped.  
 What can the poor thing do?  
 Its player's no longer  
 there.<sup>17</sup>

That brings us to the second sense in which *nirguna bhakti* is formless: in regard to the act of worship. *Nirguna bhakti* does not easily build institutions, and it is suspicious of the religious structures that exist in the world. From this point of view Islam is just as culpable as Hinduism, despite its very healthy admixture of *nirguna* theology. Islam has spawned a definite cultus and liturgy; certainly it has defined a judicial system sufficiently self-confident to punish any who stray from the written dictates of law and religion. Hinduism is

just as bad, perhaps worse. Following an ancient urge toward form, and accepting the point of view that, initially at least, human beings can perceive in no other way but through the symbols that structure their consciousness, it has pictured God in a multitude of shapes and portrayed his actions in numerous events. This is *saguna* religion, the worship of a God who takes form to act and to be comprehended and loved, and its style of worship is similarly suffused with form and quality. To walk into a Hindu temple is to be surrounded by so many sights, sounds, and smells that inexperienced visitors often feel they have strayed into a religious jungle.

Kabir certainly thought so. He found the sacrifices that priests made to the goddess Kali hideous, and he thought it was the sheerest nonsense to picture God in a succession of animal and human avatars whose form could then be worshiped and adored and whose stories could spawn an industry of religious texts, complete with their Brahmin interpreters.<sup>18</sup> Even when the point of these stories was to demonstrate the unaccountably generous love of God, Kabir had his reservations. His experience of divine love seems to have been a sense of completeness that a story-telling mode, with its assigning of character roles and its necessary separation between subjects and objects, could not describe.<sup>19</sup>

But this did not leave Kabir without words or without the community that makes words meaningful. Traditional biographies supply Kabir with one kind of religious community; a close reading of his authentic poems suggests another. The traditional tales, such as the one composed by Priyadas, tell how Kabir sought out the spiritual guidance of Ramanand and became a member of his fold. The story goes that Kabir knew the great Brahmin would not accept as a pupil anyone whose caste was as low as his, so he resorted to trickery to earn the initiation he desired. He knew that Ramanand, like any good Hindu living in Benares, went down to the Ganges before dawn each morning to take his bath. The boy Kabir watched his habits carefully and one day rolled himself up on one of the steps leading down to the river, just where the holy man always trod.

As Kabir anticipated, Ramanand was unable to see him in the pre-dawn darkness, so when his foot came to rest on a living being rather than the next step, he shouted an ejaculation of concern and surprise: "Ram!" That word is one of the great names for God in north India, referring both to one of the principal avatars of the high god Vishnu

and to God in general; it is the cry that Gandhi emitted when he was shot. It is also present as the first element in Ramanand's own name. So when Ramanand shouted "Ram," Kabir chose to interpret it as an initiatory mantra being transferred from guru to disciple, a mantra accompanied by the laying on of hands—or, just as good, feet. Forever after, Kabir regarded Ramanand as his preceptor and participated in his coterie of disciples.<sup>20</sup>

As in the case of Ravidas, there is good reason to doubt the historical validity of this association between Kabir and Ramanand. Kabir never mentions his would-be guru in his poetry, and his use of the name Ram is only in the most exceptional instances what one would expect from a pupil of Ramanand. When Kabir speaks of Ram, as he often does, it is not in a *saguna* sense. He rarely makes a connection between the Ram he speaks of and any of the celebrated acts performed by the Ram who was a form of Vishnu. For Kabir, Ram is merely common coinage for the name of God,<sup>21</sup> and one major community to which he addresses himself and in which he seems to feel at home is of quite a different orientation from the Vaisnava religion Ramanand seems to have represented.<sup>22</sup>

This is a community of yogis, adepts belonging to the then influential sect that traces its lineage to a succession of masters (*naths*) that includes Gorakhnath, a teacher who probably lived sometime between the ninth and eleventh centuries. The Nath orientation is not to Vishnu or any of his avatars but to Siva, paradigm of yogis, whom the Nath Yogis regard as the first guru in their lineage.<sup>23</sup> The Nath Yogis of Kabir's day practiced a spiritual discipline involving *hatha yoga* that led to an immediate, spontaneous (*sahaj*) experience of truth in which the True Guru (*satguru*) revealed himself in the adept. Nath Yogis could be identified as a common sight in the streets by their characteristic emblems, including big, round earrings and a whistle made from the horn of a deer.<sup>24</sup> The peculiar thing about the Naths is that at a certain point in their history a whole segment of the order refused to accept the proposition that religious, even specifically yogic attainment requires celibacy; they married and became householders like their lay followers, who included many weavers.<sup>25</sup> There are persistent hints in Kabir's poetry that he had close ties with the Naths—sometimes friendly, sometimes adversarial—and that he was deeply indebted to them for his peculiarly interior understanding of what true religion was about. One of the

important linkages between Kabir and the Naths was the matter of caste, for the Naths were particularly disdainful of the niceties of Hindu hierarchy, and many Untouchables and low-caste people had been admitted into their ranks. The *nirguna* vision of religious truth that they espoused was certainly a powerful antidote to the *saguna* institutions of image-worship and dietary precision that so often became the tutelary preserve of Brahmins. In a way *nirguna bhakti* was the natural haven for any who felt themselves shunned by Hindu society.

### Kabir Versus Ravidas

For this reason it is curious to see what tradition has done to the natural bond between Kabir and Ravidas—both Benarsis, both low in the caste hierarchy, and both exponents of the *nirguna* persuasion. At first, of course, tradition affirmed this bond. The oldest stories portray Kabir and Ravidas as spiritual brothers by making them both pupils of Ramanand. There is a measure of theological cooptation in this, since through their teacher both become Vaisnavas—worshippers of Vishnu and his avatars Ram and Krishna—but the story supplies a link that recognizes how much they had in common. There have been other ways of doing the same thing. Contrary to what the *camars* of Sri Govardhanpur say, there is an important Benares tradition that makes Kabir and Ravidas brothers, as it were, from birth. Kabir's putative birthplace is located at Lahartara, on the western outskirts of the city, and Ravidas is said to have been born in the largely low-caste village of Maduadih not far away.<sup>26</sup>

Since the late seventeenth century, however, a document has been circulating that questions the comforting implications of such proximity and suggests that the two holy men were in fact opponents to some degree. This versified "Dialogue between Kabir and Ravidas" (*Kabir-Ravidas Samvad* or *Kabir-Ravidas Gosti*) was definitely composed by someone who saw Ravidas as an inferior to Kabir.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the discussion Ravidas addresses Kabir respectfully, first merely as his elder (*budhe*), but later as his master (*svami*), and by the time the dialogue is finished he has been entirely converted to Kabir's point of view. The issue that divides the two saints initially is the crucial one of *nirguna* versus *saguna* religion—whether God has

form or not—and it is Kabir who is given the privilege of espousing the consistently *nirguna* position. To Ravidas is relegated the thankless task of defending *saguna bhakti*. He asserts that people need the kind of immediate, this-worldly salvation that Krishna and Ram provide, but Kabir always has a comeback. He bests Ravidas by pointing out, for instance, that the hell from which Krishna would save his followers is really an illusion,<sup>28</sup> or that the legend of Ram shows him capable of being deluded by the chimera of a deer. Can such a man be God?<sup>29</sup> Then Ravidas tries to argue the importance of a third member of the pantheon—the goddess Sakti or Durga—but Kabir scoffs at her dependence on sacrifices.<sup>30</sup> In the end, disabused of the notion that *saguna* and *nirguna* religion are essentially the same, even if his own teacher Ramanand had taught it, Ravidas asks Kabir what the truth of the matter is. Kabir explains that Gorakhnath is his guru and teaches Ravidas the truth of the God who has no shape (*nirakar*) and the Ram who is within (*atmaram*). Ravidas embraces this message gladly.<sup>31</sup>

It is no wonder that followers of Ravidas have sometimes resented this text, and they are able to point to others in which the outcome of the debate is depicted in a diametrically opposite way: Ravidas bests Kabir. Among these are a recent redaction of the *Bhavisya Purana* ("The History of the Future") and an equally recent *Ravidas Ramayana* ("The Epic of Ravidas"). The latter treats matters not only of doctrine but of practice, showing how Kabir at first refused to drink water offered him by Ravidas on the grounds that the *camar*'s touch had polluted it, then was made to see the error of his ways.<sup>32</sup> Such a vignette shows how theologically pliable such debates can be. Whereas the original *Kabir-Ravidas Samvad* scorns Ravidas for thinking that *nirguna* and *saguna* perspectives ultimately come to the same thing, this catholicity is held up as a mark of sophistication in the *Ravidas Ramayana*; and recent documents issued by Kabir's following have a tendency to say the same thing.<sup>33</sup>

### The Kabir Panth

A Kabirian catholicity! How the man would have shuddered. But that would be nothing compared to the astonishment he might feel at seeing some of the ways in which his name lives on in modern-day

Benares. One of the great hubs of the city is called Kabir Square (*kabir caura*), and it is named not just for the man but for an institution: the Kabir monastary (*kabir math*) that lies hidden in the lanes not far away. It is built around the room where Kabir is said to have lived, and there one may view his relics: his wooden shoes, pieces from his loom, the wooden pot from which he supposedly drank, the indent staff Gorakhnath is said to have given him, and the huge rope garland bestowed upon him by Ramanand in recognition of the teacher-student bond between them. But if one turns and faces the great courtyard, walks past the monks' cells, and peers into the shrine that dominates the great open space, one sees what is from the perspective of Kabir's own words much more remarkable: a great picture of Kabir himself. Here is the prophet of iconoclastic *nirguna* religion apparently enshrined in the enemy's sanctuary: to a certain degree he has become a figure in the pantheon of *saguna* Hinduism. Morning and evening, a lection of poems attributed to Kabir is recited in a fast-paced chant by the assembled monks and whatever lay adherents join their prayer. This ritualized reading is accompanied by a ceremony in which the likeness of Kabir is honored with an offering of lights—exactly the sort one expects to see waved before the images in any Hindu temple—and in one of the branches of the Kabir Panth, the Dharmadas sect, that likeness is in fact an image, a statue.<sup>34</sup>

In the evening service at Kabir Square it is made explicitly clear that these offerings of word and gesture are directed toward Kabir himself, and some of the means that have been chosen to do this in recent years might have come as quite a shock to the master. Kabir tirelessly excoriated the Brahmins for pretending to have access to specialized religious knowledge, and the Sanskrit language was the chief medium that made this monopoly possible. Kabir is remembered as having ridiculed it as antiquated and stilted. One of his best known, if not best authenticated, verses contrasts its rhythms with those of the vernacular tongue by asking whether one would rather drink from the brackish waters of an old, little-used well or quench one's thirst at the side of a thriving, bubbling stream.<sup>35</sup> Yet not long ago, to end the evening service performed at Kabir's shrine in Benares, the guru was held up as "the supreme Kabir" in no other language than Sanskrit, and on occasion the homily following the service also came out in Sanskrit: the speaker of the day might simply read from a

Sanskrit commentary on Kabir's poems. One might think that such words would go over the heads of everyone in the audience, but this is not so, for novitiates in the monastery have the option of studying Sanskrit in a school not far away. Here as in other Kabir monasteries the residents and pupils are primarily lower-caste people, but they have cheerfully adopted the marks of brahminical religion in its ascetic mode. The abbot, who wears the same conical cap Kabir is supposed to have worn, is treated as deserving of the majesty one might accord to the head of any high-caste ascetic order.<sup>36</sup>

What has happened? Weber called similar transformations in the history of religion, "the routinization of charisma," a process whereby personal magnetism is transmuted into institutional authority.<sup>37</sup> But if the history of the Kabir Panth, the "path" that venerates him, is a history of routinization, it takes a particularly Hindu form, for not only have Kabir's teachings been codified and his spiritual lineage authorized, but at least in certain branches of the community Kabir is worshiped as a transcendent being, as God himself. In texts such as the *Anurag Sagar* ("Ocean of Love"), which appeared sometime in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, he is said to have been begotten by the Primal Being at the beginning of time to defend the cause of good against the ever-threatening forces of evil, which are under the command of an equally primordial demiurge called Niranjan ("Untainted") or Kal ("Death," "Time"). The struggle is great, especially after Kal emanates the Hindu pantheon to confuse and delude humankind, but Kabir is always more than able to hold his own, acting through various incarnations as ages pass. In the end, he favors the world with a direct expression of himself—the fifteenth-century Kabir whose words are treasured by devotees ever after—and the battle between good and evil is tipped decisively in the direction of good.<sup>38</sup>

The salty, skeptical Kabir we know from the poetry that is most likely to be authentic would doubtless have had unkind things to say about such cosmological and soteriological mysteries, even if they were flattering to him personally. And it is hard to imagine that he would find the services at his monastery in Benares much less bewildering than Jesus would find the extravagances displayed each Sunday morning at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. But the institutions of Kabir have not silenced their "founder." Every merchant and milkman in Benares and indeed the

whole of north India has a verse of Kabir to quote, and for all that they have been repeated in the last five hundred years, many retain the tart, true-to-life irreverence they must have had when the master first unleashed them on the world.

## POEMS AND EPIGRAMS OF KABIR

### Poems

Go naked if you want,  
Put on animal skins.

What does it matter till you see the inward Ram?

If the union yogis seek  
Came from roaming about in the buff,  
every deer in the forest would be saved.

If shaving your head  
Spelled spiritual success,  
heaven would be filled with sheep.

And brother, if holding back your seed  
Earned you a place in paradise,  
eunuchs would be the first to arrive.

Kabir says: Listen brother,  
Without the name of Ram  
who has ever won the spirit's prize?

[KG pad 174]

Pundit, how can you be so dumb?  
You're going to drown, along with all your kin,  
unless you start speaking of Ram.

Vedas, Puranas—why read them?  
It's like loading an ass with sandalwood!  
Unless you catch on and learn how Ram's name goes,  
how will you reach the end of the road?

You slaughter living beings and call it religion:  
hey brother, what would irreligion be?  
"Great Saint"—that's how you love to greet each other:  
Who then would you call a murderer?

Your mind is blind. You've no knowledge of yourselves.  
Tell me, brother, how can you teach anyone else?  
Wisdom is a thing you sell for worldly gain,  
so there goes your human birth—in vain.

You say: "It's Narad's command."  
"It's what Vyas says to do."  
"Go and ask Sukdev, the sage."  
Kabir says: you'd better go and lose yourself in Ram  
for without him, brother, you drown.

[KG pad 191]

Hey Qazi,  
 what's that book you're preaching from?  
 And reading, reading—how many days?  
 Still you haven't mastered one word.  
 Drunk with power, you want to grab me;  
 then comes the circumcision.

Brother, what can I say?—  
 If God had wanted to make me a Muslim,  
 why didn't he make the incision?  
 You cut away the foreskin, and then you have a Muslim;  
 so what about your women?

What are they?  
 Women, so they say, are only half-formed men:  
 I guess they must stay Hindus to the end.  
 Hindus, Muslims—where did they come from?  
 Who got them started down this road?  
 Search inside, search your heart and look:  
 Who made heaven come to be?  
 Fool,  
 Throw away that book, and sing of Ram.  
 What you're doing has nothing to do with him.  
 Kabir has caught hold of Ram for his refrain,  
 And the Qazi?  
 He spends his life in vain.

[KG pad 178]

Kabir is done with stretching thread and weaving.  
 He's written on his frame the name of Ram.

His mother steals away and secretly weeps:  
 "O God, how will these children survive?"

Kabir says:  
 "Whenever I'd thread the weaver's shuttle  
 I'd forget to be a lover of Ram;

And listen, Mother, he's the king of all three worlds:  
 He is the one who provides."

[KG pad 12]

Tell me, Ram: what will happen to me?  
 I haven't shown much wit: I've abandoned Benares

Like a fish who leaves the water and finds himself outside,  
 I'm stripped of any merit earned in former lives.

I squandered a life spent in Siva's city:  
 moved to Magahar when my time was ripe—

Penance in Kashi year after year  
 And here I am in Magahar to die.

Kashi, Magahar: they seem the same.  
 Which can rectify a life of little faith?

In Kashi, they say, you can cry to Siva when you die.  
 And Kabir? Dead already.

He's enjoying life with Ram.

[KG pad 46]

If caste was what the Creator had in mind,  
why wasn't anyone born  
with Siva's three-lined sign?

If you're a Brahmin,  
from a Brahmin woman born,  
why didn't you come out some special way?

And if you're a Muslim,  
from a Muslim woman born,  
why weren't you circumcised inside?

Says Kabir: No one is lowly born.  
The only lowly are those  
who never talk of Ram.

[KG *pad* 182]

Why be so proud of this useless, used-up body?  
One moment dead, and it's gone.

How nicely you adorn it with sugar and butter and milk:  
Once the breath goes out, it's fit to burn.

That head with its turban so artfully arranged  
Will soon be adorned with the jabbing beaks of crows.

Bones: they burn like tinder.  
Hair: it burns like hay.

And still, says Kabir, people won't wake up—  
Not until they feel death's club  
inside their skulls.

[KG *pad* 62]

Hey brother, why do you want me to talk?  
Talk and talk and the real things get lost.

Talk and talk and things get out of hand.  
Why not stop talking and think?

If you meet someone good, listen a little, speak;  
If you meet someone bad, clench up like a fist.

Talking with a wise man is a great reward.  
Talking with a fool? A waste.

Kabir says: A pot makes noise if it's half full,  
But fill it to the brim—no sound.

[KG *pad* 61]

That master weaver, whose skills  
are beyond our knowing,  
has stretched his warp  
through the world.

He has fastened his loom  
between earth and sky,  
where the shuttlecocks are the sun  
and moon.  
He fills the shuttle with the thread  
of easy spontaneity,  
and weaves and weaves  
an endless pattern.

But now, says Kabir, that weaver!  
He breaks apart his loom  
and tangles the thread  
in thread.

[KG *pad* 150]

That thief has gone thieving, careening around the world,  
And he didn't say a word when he left.

Remember? You were my childhood friend.  
Why did you run away so far?

You are my man, I am your woman,  
and your going weighs heavier than a stone.

The body is dust, the body is air,  
And this thief brings Kabir, his servant,  
nothing but fear.

[KG *pad* 139]

Pundit, so well-read, go ask God  
who his teacher is  
and who he's taught.  
He alone knows what shape he has  
and he keeps it to himself,  
alone.  
Child of a childless woman,  
a fatherless son,  
someone without feet who climbs trees,  
A soldier without weaponry,  
no elephant, no horse,  
charging into battle with no sword,  
A sprout without a seed,  
a tree without a trunk,  
blossoms on a tree without a branch,  
A woman without beauty,  
a scent without a flower,  
a tank filled to the top without water,  
A temple without a god,  
worship without leaves,  
a lazy bee that has no wings.  
You have to be a hero to reach that highest state;  
the rest, like insects,  
burn like moths in the flame—  
A flame without a lamp,  
a lamp without a flame,  
an unsounded sound that sounds without end.  
Those who comprehend it,  
let them comprehend.  
Kabir has gone off into God.

[KG *pad* 119]

## Epigrams

So I'm born a weaver,  
so what?  
I've got the Lord in my heart.  
Kabir:  
Secure in the arms of Ram,  
free from every snare.

[AG *sakhi* 82]

The true Master—  
what can he do  
When the pupil is inept?  
Trying to awaken him is just  
so much air  
Blown through an unfingered flute.

[KG *sakhi* 1.5]

Kabir:  
Even worthless bushes  
Are invaded by a nearby  
sandal tree.  
Its fragrance  
makes everything around it  
A likeness of itself.

[KG *sakhi* 4.1]

Your chance of human birth  
Doesn't come time and again.  
Once the ripe fruit falls  
You can't stick it back  
on the branch.

[KG *sakhi* 15.5]

The lean doe  
Avoids the greens  
Beside this pond.  
Numberless hunters,  
Only one life.  
How many arrows  
can she dodge?

[KG *sakhi* 16.3]

Scorched by the forest fire,  
The wood still stands  
and wails:  
“Don’t let me fall to the smith!  
Don’t let me burn again!”

[KG *sakhi* 16.2]

They burn:  
The bones like tinder,  
hair like straw.  
And seeing the world  
in flames, Kabir  
turns away.

[KG *sakhi* 15.7]

Kabir:  
My mind was soothed  
When I found the boundless knowledge,  
And the fires  
that scorch the world  
To me are water cool.

[KG *sakhi* 17.1]

The sense of separation:  
 A snake inside the body  
   that no snakecharmer's sounds  
   can control.

And separation from Ram:  
   that's loss of life—  
   or worse, of mind.

[KG *sakhi* 2.1]

God is the jewel,  
 His follower the jeweler  
   hawking him through the bazaar.  
 Only when a discriminating  
 Customer comes along  
   will the jewel ever sell.

[KG *sakhi* 18.1]

I'm dead—  
   dead of bad company,  
 A banana plant near a tree of thorns.  
 With every breeze, that tree  
   tears the leaves.  
 If you're living near goddess-worshippers,  
   move!

[KG *sakhi* 24.2]

Kabir:  
 The hut was made of sticks  
 And all ten sides caught fire;  
 Pundits, pundits—  
   they burned inside  
 While the fools ran out  
   and saved their lives.

[KG *sakhi* 21.11]

The pundits have taken  
 A highway that takes them  
   away,  
   and they're gone.  
 Kabir has climbed to  
 The impossible pass  
   of Ram,  
   and stayed.

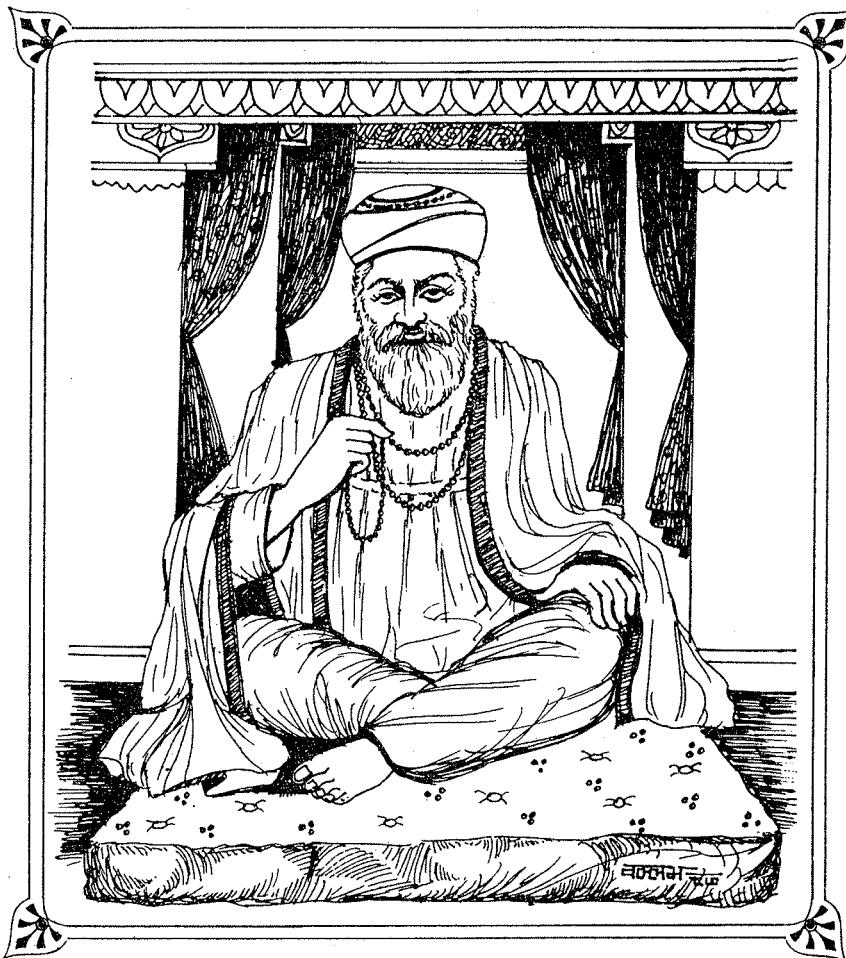
[KG *sakhi* 20.4]

Kabir:  
 The instrument is still,  
 Its strings snapped.  
 What can the poor thing do?  
 Its player's no longer  
   there.

[KG *sakhi* 16.1]

## THREE

# Nanak



*The guru is the lake, the sea,  
The guru is the ship,  
the guru is the place to ford the stream.*

Of all the singer-saints of north India, it is Nanak whose name is most closely tied to a particular religious community. So closely, in fact, that the community has recast the name: Nanak is almost never referred to simply as Nanak. Instead he is Guru Nanak—Nanak the Teacher, Nanak the Preceptor—and so in a way takes his identity from those who are his pupils. These are the Sikhs, and their name means exactly that: “pupils.”

### Nanak and the Sikhs

The Sikhs are a colorful and energetic group. Their distinctive turbans, high and tightly tied, make them stand out in any Indian crowd, and they are even more noticeable in an international setting. Indeed, many Sikhs have settled abroad. In the early decades of this century tens of thousands migrated to farms in California and British Columbia from their home territory of the Punjab, in northwest India, and in more recent years a large influx of Sikh traders, professionals, and industrial workers have made their homes in Britain.<sup>1</sup> Within India, too, the Sikhs have fanned out from their native Punjab and are often seen driving trucks and taxis, running businesses, and serving as an important component in the Indian armed services, much as they did during the British Raj. They are an active,

aggressive community, and their military heritage is by no means incidental to who they are.

The Sikh community was quick to form. Within several decades after the death of Nanak in 1539 they had established specific rituals and festival days, identified a place of pilgrimage all their own (Goindval; later the focus shifted to Amritsar, where the Golden Temple was built), and defined a body of sacred writings (later expanded into the *Adi Granth* or "Primal Book") they took to be authoritative. Before the sixteenth century was over, their ranks had swollen with great numbers of adherents from the Jat caste, a group of hefty Punjabi farmers whose skills at warfare brought Sikhs into increasing conflict with the Mughal rulers of the period, who were Muslims. These tensions deepened in the seventeenth century, until the Sikh leadership withdrew from the plains into the foothills of the Himalayas for safety. Sikh memory has it that there, in 1699, the tenth guru in the lineage that started with Nanak tested the fealty of his followers against the standard of life itself. Guru Gobind Singh announced that he required five men as sacrifices to his sword, but when the brave ones came forward he decapitated goats instead and made the men the nucleus of a Sikh brotherhood (*khalsa*) that he constituted along military lines. As signs of their new identity they agreed, among other things, always to carry a sword, wear a steel bracelet, and keep their hair uncut; and as if to consolidate their kinship with Gobind Singh, they each took his surname, meaning "lion," as their own.<sup>2</sup>

The struggles of Sikhs to maintain their identity in the face of Mughal hostility did not last forever, but a vigorous pride in the community's ability to survive and thrive became a permanent legacy of the period. It was expressed in one of the most widely used emblems in the Sikh heritage, a double-edged sword that has played a significant role in Sikh history ever since.

One series of events is recent history indeed. In 1984 a number of



FIGURE 1. Sword emblem

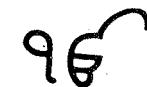


FIGURE 2. 1 Omkar emblem

armed Sikhs barricaded themselves inside the Golden Temple, and the Indian government sent troops against them. In response, two Sikhs in Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's bodyguard succeeded in assassinating her, and not long afterward expatriate Sikhs were implicated in terrorist actions throughout the world. Meanwhile, hundreds of Sikhs were massacred in retributory riots that followed Mrs. Gandhi's assassination; in the ensuing climate of world opinion, however, Sikhs were much more readily pictured as bloodthirsty avengers than as bloodied victims.

The roots of Sikh militancy are deep, but probably not deep enough to have sprung up in Nanak's soil. The sword of Sikhism takes one back to the seventeenth century, but to reach all the way back to Nanak one must seek out another Sikh emblem, one seemingly very different in tone. It is the diagram that emerges when the first two words of the *Adi Granth*—words attributed to Nanak—are written together in Punjabi script. The words are *ek omkar*—"i Omkar" or simply "i OM"—and they are almost always interpreted as meaning that God, who is signified by the mysterious syllable OM, is one. Sikhs regard this as the greatest message of their faith, so one finds *ek omkar* emblazoned in the insignia of political parties, on homes and places of worship, on bumpers and dashboards, and tattooed on the wrists of countless individual Sikhs. Universalistic doctrine may be no guarantee against sectarian narrowness in practice, but anyone who has ever gotten into a conversation with a turbaned taxi driver or bus passenger will attest that most Sikhs understand the affirmation "God is one" to be inclusive in spirit. Clearly this was Nanak's intention—so much so that one might even wonder whether the term "God" is too personal and therefore too restrictive to capture his meaning. Militant communalism plays no part in such a broad vision.

A second aspect of Nanak's teaching that fits ill with the violent streak in Sikh history is his evident quietism. Of all the *bhakti* poets of his era, Nanak is one who places the greatest emphasis on the need

to wait for divine truth, to be silent before it. His poems breathe a deep tranquillity that makes him perhaps the least belligerent of all his *bhakti* compeers. He speaks time and again of the value of pondering and listening, as in this much-repeated refrain:

From listening,  
sin and sorrow  
disappear.<sup>3</sup>

The typical picture of Nanak among Sikhs has kept this sense of quiet interiority very much in view. In the poster art that is so ubiquitous in modern India he is almost always shown as a motionless white-bearded figure whose eyes roll up as if to survey an inward source of light. Inspiration comes to him in the form of a glistening "i Omkar" mantra, and the luminosity it gives to his face testifies that his contact with the truth is direct and unmediated. He is a mystic.<sup>4</sup>

Yet Nanak was more than a mystic. If anything in his poetry suggests how he might have become the progenitor of a community with such a definite, defiant sense of itself, it is the sober integration of his thought. This may well have contributed a core of logical coherency around which a well defined social form could coalesce. In his attention to sustained theological discourse, as against the often episodic and metaphorical insights of *bhakti* poetry, Nanak stands out from forebears such as Kabir and contemporaries such as Ravidas. His poems often group themselves naturally as extended meditations on a single idea. Often a sequence of poems will serve to elaborate a central phrase: "by order," "if you ponder it," "beyond number," and so forth. And within individual poems Nanak has a tendency to adumbrate multitiered metaphysical visions, something no other *bhakti* poet of his period cares to do.<sup>5</sup>

Like Kabir, Nanak preached the overarching truth of God and the inadequacy of any human institution to capture it, but he also had a tendency to emphasize the sense of sovereignty and order that flows from such a transcendent state, whereas Kabir leaves its operations a mystery. It is true that Nanak's zealous followers have sometimes spent themselves in the cause of channeling and perhaps limiting such transcendent power, but the connection between him and them is not entirely absent. The systematic strain in Nanak's teaching

seems to have provided them with a unified perception of divine power, and of themselves perhaps as its instruments. Hence Nanak's intellectual architecture has strengthened the hand of those in Sikh history who were concerned with institutional edifices, and Nanak himself may have been the first among them.

### Nanak in History and Legend

Unfortunately, it is almost as difficult to piece together an accurate sense of Nanak's life and of the events that followed his death as it is to reconstruct accurate biographies for any of the other *bhakti* saints. Yet one can accept a minimal shell as biographically accurate, for the sometimes divergent accounts of Nanak's life agree in a number of details so mundane that it is hard to imagine any reason for fabricating them.<sup>6</sup>

Nanak was born in the town of Rai Bhoi di Talvandi, forty miles southwest of Lahore, in 1469. Nowadays the town is called Nankana Sahib in his honor. His father was a *bedi khatri*, that is, a member of a merchant caste. Some reports specify that he was the man who kept the town land records for Rai Buler, the village chief. It appears that the family was literate in some measure, since the reports agree that Nanak's brother-in-law was able to obtain a clerical position in the court of the regional ruler, Daulat Khan Lodi. Nanak married and became the father of two sons, Lakhmi Das and Sricand, but family responsibilities seem not to have deterred him from undertaking a certain amount of travel; how much and where is not clear. At some point he settled in the town of Kartarpur, on the bank of the Ravi River, and there he died in 1539 or perhaps the year before. There is little reason to doubt that before his death he designated one of his followers, Angad, to be his successor—the second guru—and it is significant that he did not choose either of his sons for the role. A story preserved by the Udasi order of ascetics, whose history intersects that of the Sikh community at a number of points, states that Sricand, Nanak's younger son, was unhappy with his father's decision as to who should succeed him in heading up his community of devotees, but more of that later.

There is much more to be learned about Nanak than this pale shell

provides, and a voluminous set of Sikh biographies stands ready to help in the task. The problem is, of course, that they tell us less about who the historical Nanak was than about who his followers wanted him to be. But in this regard several motifs are of particular interest. First, there is the quietism to which we have already referred. Although one or two legends depict Nanak as the stringent, demanding sort of individual who might well serve as a precursor of Gobind Singh,<sup>7</sup> it is at least as strong a theme in these hagiographies that Nanak's native preference was to withdraw from the world rather than engage it. He is said to have experienced recurrent periods of silence, inactivity, and somnolence that he subsequently explained as being caused by a profound suspicion of what passes for life and learning in this world, and he resisted taking up any of the occupations his family proposed for him, electing to keep to himself instead.<sup>8</sup>

According to his hagiographies, Nanak's moment of blinding insight came one day as he bathed in the river Vein near the town of Sultanpur. His response was characteristic: he immediately left the job he had finally accepted as a clerk in the court of the prince who ruled the area and set out to wander, as any Hindu ascetic or Muslim *faqir* might do. The legends say he persuaded a bard called Mardana to go along with him, and the two of them headed for the wilderness, the bard surviving on what he could scrounge and beg, while Nanak nourished himself on nothing more than air. The bulk of what is written about Nanak's life recounts what happened in various encounters after these two renunciants emerged again into contact with humanity, traveling far and wide. These were remarkable occurrences indeed. Animals were restored from death to life; Nath Yogis were bested in a debate that took place on mythical Mount Sumeru, at the center of the world; and when Nanak died, his body turned to vapor and two piles of flowers remained in its place—one for Hindus and the other for Muslims, much as at the death of Kabir.<sup>9</sup> We have, then, a picture of an extraordinary being active in the world, but it is clearly implied that he derived his powers from his primary devotion to the introverted life of the archetypal mystic.

A second motif in hagiographies of Nanak that attracts special attention is the emphasis they place on the relation they perceive to exist between Nanak and the other saints and potentates of his era. In particular, the authors of Nanak's life stories are eager to establish

Nanak's superiority over the Nath Yogis. He encounters them on a number of occasions, and often miracles occur that make it clear that Nanak is in possession of magical powers that exceed those the Nathas and other yogis so carefully cultivate.<sup>10</sup> For example, when Nanak sits down beneath a withered banyan tree where Nathas typically gather, it springs to verdant life. And when Nanak flies through the air, he is able to go three times as fast as his Nath counterparts.<sup>11</sup> An essential element in this comparison is that such powers are merely reflexes to Nanak: he does not desire them for their own sake. In one telling episode, Nanak actually has to break a pot that fills with jewels every time he tries, at the Nathas' request, to fill it with water; then he reconstitutes it for his own purposes. Evidently he prefers the simplicity of water and the satisfaction of a request fulfilled to great riches.<sup>12</sup>

Nanak's indifference to his unusual powers is underscored in other ways, too. In one episode he is made to converse with the great Sufi saint Sheikh Farid in a land whose king has recently died and been cremated. The king's skull refuses to explode and thereby release the soul inside, because, as astrologers have determined, the king once told a lie. They divine that the skull will break once a *sadhu*, a true holy person, enters the kingdom. Sheikh Farid bows to Nanak on this score, feeling it should be Nanak who walks into the kingdom first, and when he does, the skull instantly pops open.<sup>13</sup> Thus Nanak is given pride of rank not only by the greatest Hindu adepts, the Nathas, but by the most exalted Muslim saints as well, and in neither case at his own insistence.

This is the third arresting motif in stories of Nanak: the effort devoted to interposing him between Hindus and Muslims. In fact, this is made out to be the keynote for his whole ministry, the formula with which he is baptized. The story goes that once, after singing devotional songs, Nanak bathed in the river Vein at Sultanpur and was transported by divine messengers into the heavenly court. There he was given a cup of the liquid of immortality (*amrt*); it was the divine Name. Nanak was commanded to drink it and then preach it. Once back on earth he spent a day in silence, but when he began to interpret the Word he had imbibed, it was with the following utterance: "There is neither Hindu nor Muslim."<sup>14</sup>

The reader of Nanak's holy biographies learns this lesson many times over. The very first encounter Nanak has after he emerges from

the wilderness after his "baptism" is with a certain Sheikh Sajjan, who has been waylaying, robbing, and killing members of the two communities by trapping them, each to his preference, in a temple or a mosque he has constructed to attract their religious attentions. This evil man, who thus stands apart from both Hindus and Muslims, becomes Nanak's first convert.<sup>15</sup> The sense is that Nanak's message represents an edifice more fundamental than either temple or mosque; Nanak shows a way not to destroy their respective worshipers but to give them new life. The same point is made visually in the garb Nanak is said to have worn. It combines the saffron-colored robes, wooden sandals, bone necklace, and forehead mark that characterize the Hindu ascetic with the white caftan, the slippers, the waistcloth, and the ascetic's hat worn by the Sufi *fāqir*.<sup>16</sup> Nanak, we learn, is neither and both.

For all their evenhandedness in representing Nanak as equally Hindu and Muslim, it is understandable that Nanak's hagiographers should have been particularly eager to show his superiority to the religious group they evidently recognized as their most threatening opponent: the Muslims. This comes out at a number of points, but never so vividly as on the occasions when Nanak is said to have traveled to Mecca, the sacred center of Islam, and to Baghdad, the seat of its earthly power during the Abbasid caliphate. During his sojourn in Mecca, one account says, or on the way to Mecca or even in Medina, as others have it, Nanak entered a mosque and fell asleep with his feet pointing in the direction of the holy city and its central monument, the *ka'ba*. When this offense was discovered by an irate *qāzi*, he rotated Nanak so that his feet would point the opposite direction and his head would honor the focal point of Muslim ritual, but to his amazement the niche in the mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca rotated along with Nanak's feet. It was clear who was honoring whom.<sup>17</sup>

Events at Baghdad were not quite so startling, but they make the same point. Nanak is said to have ascended to heaven there and to have surveyed the entire created universe, much as Muhammad did on the celebrated night journey in which he rose from Jerusalem to heaven. The story ends with an appearance of the food considered sacramental to Sikhs (*karah prasad*), suggesting which religion bears the stamp of true universality: Sikhism, not Islam. By the same token Muhammad is demoted to second place among the world's great prophets.<sup>18</sup>

## Hagiography and Doctrine

While it seems unlikely that these stories correspond very closely to any real events in Nanak's life, there is a definite tie between what they teach in narrative form and what Nanak taught through the medium of poetry. Several of the themes found in the nine-hundred-odd compositions attributed to him in the *Adi Granth* do provide a basis in doctrine for tales such as these. Again, three are particularly worthy of mention: his connection to the Naths; his position somewhere between Hindus and Muslims; and his preoccupation with the Word, or Name, of God.

In Nanak's biographies it is reported that he had discussions with the most important progenitors of the Nath order, all the way back to the sage Gorakhnath and even the god Siva.<sup>19</sup> Nanak's poetry does not quite provide a script for these discussions, but one does find there several passages that he evidently addressed to individual members of the Nath community, and the issue of defining the at times genuinely close relation between his teaching and theirs comes quickly to the fore.<sup>20</sup> Both, for instance, cultivate an awareness of the "unstruck sound" (*anahad sabd*) that lies at the heart of the Creation, but they do so in different ways. For the Naths this means a specific regimen of *hatha yoga*, whereas Nanak recommends a more encompassing approach that involves every aspect of life and requires no special yogic preparation.<sup>21</sup> It is noteworthy that the vocabulary is the same, however, and the doctrinal difference does correspond to the sense of inveterate, generalized receptivity that Nanak's biographers take as distinguishing him from the industrious but uninspired Naths. Whether they are just in attributing a preoccupation with the cultivation of magical power per se to Nanak's Nath interlocutors is less clear.

The situation is much the same in regard to the relation between Hindus and Muslims. Here again Nanak has definite things to say, but they are characteristically in the same mode as Kabir's utterances. That is, Nanak is less concerned to make himself a broker between Hindu and Muslim ideas than to make clear how it is that both religions fall short of the truth. Nanak's hagiographers do capture something of this sense when they report him as saying, after his initiation, "There is neither Hindu nor Muslim."<sup>22</sup> But after that the stories of Nanak's life take a decisive turn. They are not content merely to show how Nanak cancels both Hindu and Muslim ver-

sions of religion; they also suggest that he encompasses them, thus transcending them not just in the negative sense but in a positive one, too.

With Kabir, whose death story Nanak shares, this would simply be wrong, but there is some justification for it where Nanak is concerned. His approach is more systematic than Kabir's: he describes a divine order (*hukam*) that not only transcends all earthly forms but dictates what they are. This is "order" in both senses of the word—something coherent and something demanded—and the sense of "design" perhaps mediates between the two meanings.<sup>23</sup>

This is quite different from the sort of transcendence that Kabir represents. As his "upside down" poems show, the truth he reveals ultimately contradicts human logic; with Nanak, by contrast, the True Guru's truth supplies the logic that gives the world the meaning it genuinely has. It is perhaps no accident that the term Nanak uses to describe that order, *hukam*, is drawn from an Islamic vocabulary. It is unusual in that virtually every other key term in Nanak's theological lexicon comes from the Hindu side—but even that one departure, a significant one, makes him more "Muslim" than Kabir and gives some rationale for the popular conception that he was a bridge between the two camps.

The leap to associating Nanak as guru with this transcendent order is one that the biographer-devotee makes, not Nanak himself, but here too Nanak paves the way. As the spokesman for this order he becomes more than a poet (and therefore, some might say, less); he almost attains the status of systematic theologian, something to which Kabir never aspires. There is a cerebral majesty in Nanak's depiction of divine truth that lends itself to being read not just as undermining the half-truths and mistaken practices of Islam and Hinduism, but as arching above them. He seems to establish a greater reality of which they are partial derivatives. Nanak may not quite say this himself—certainly he does not say anything like that *about* himself—but the jump from what he says to what his biographers conclude is not vast. In fact, there may be a specific point of transition, for in describing the five stages in the soul's spiritual ascent—something characteristically Nanak-like and totally at variance with most of Kabir—he begins with *dharam* (*dharma*, i.e., "religion," "religious order") as the lowest rung.<sup>24</sup> The highest rung, *sac* (*satya*, i.e., "truth"), is of course what he himself proclaims.

Finally, there is a connection between the hagiographers' description of the power of Nanak's "baptism" and commissioning at the river Vein, and what Nanak himself has to say about the divine Name, its focus and substance. The story of Nanak's initiation is phrased in the language of Hindu worship (*puja*): Nanak comes before the divine throne as if before an altar, and receives a substance that transmits divine grace (*prasad*) before he goes away. When Hindus come into temples, the two essential features of their worship are eye contact with the image of the deity (this is called *darsan*, "seeing") and receiving some item of food or drink that has first been ingested (symbolically, many Hindus concede) and therefore blessed by the god: *prasad*, or "grace."

According to Nanak's biographers, he goes through both these essential steps, but in a strikingly different mode. The temple into which he is ushered is the heavenly court, and in Nanak's case this carries the clear implication that it is a temple without form. His visual experience of the divine is translated into an aural one, and the "grace" that he receives to take home with him is similarly invisible: the divine Name. As the idiom of the ear is substituted for that of the eye and tongue, an interior experience of religion is substituted for one with a visible, external component.

This much is secondhand report, but Nanak effects just such a transformation of familiar Hindu notions in his own theology. Listening becomes the central sacrament, for according to Nanak the Word itself (*sabda*)—the revealing of the Name—is the true guru and the dispenser of blessing and order.<sup>25</sup> When he exalts the guru, he takes over a term familiarly used by the Naths and speaks of the *satguru*, the "True Guru"; like the Naths, he conceives this guru as an interior power, one that can be known specifically in the medium of sound. The effect of this Word-made-Guru or Guru-made-Word corresponds exactly to the benefits of Hindu *prasad*. On the one hand it unites the partakers, the hearers, with what is given, and on the other it purifies the recipients so that they are progressively less preoccupied with and less polluted by the sounds and substances they themselves generate. Nanak identifies these negative realities as products of self-centeredness (*haumai*)<sup>26</sup> and says that they can only be diluted by a growing sensitivity to the full dimensions of the order that God has decreed for the world. The remembrance, love, and above all repetition of the divine Name make that possible.

Hence one has in Nanak's utterances a high degree of repetition, whose effect is to make Sikhs experience the Word, the Name, as transforming over time. Gradually his pupils thus approach what Nanak is said to have experienced in a flash at the outset of his ministry: a pure, all-encompassing infusion of the Name.

That Name is an ocean, Nanak says, and he loves to emphasize the point by making clear that it has an oceanic breadth. He describes the divine as being motionless and immovable (*akal*), beginningless (*anadi*), timeless (*akal*), colorless (*anil*), spotless (*niranjan*), unborn (*ayoni*), intangible (*achut*), undecaying (*avinasi*), indestructible (*anahat*), unformed (*nirankar*), and much more. The nameless names are "numberless" (*asankh*) and without end (*ant na*).<sup>27</sup> Though the Name is singular and denotes a reality that is unique, one sees immediately that its meaning is by the same token boundless. Hence the first word of the foundational "*Omkar*" mantra (and therefore of the whole *Adi Granth*) is precisely the number one, and the rest of that mantra is a dense litany of boundless adjectives, several of which we have just listed.

The same can be said for the person who speaks such a Word or words. The guru is described as the singular bridge (or, alternatively, the raft) that makes salvation across the ocean of existence possible, but at the same time he is an ocean himself, containing nothing but the all-comprehending Word.<sup>28</sup> Nanak says one must bathe in that oceanic Guru—the archetypal Hindu act of purification—and his own initiation is also an act of bathing.

Of course, when Nanak says this about the guru, he means the inner guru, the True Guru, God Himself. But Sikh hagiography makes it clear that Nanak's disciples have also experienced the guru in external form, as Nanak. In a theological system that identifies the experience of the divine so totally with Name and Word, it is no surprise that the guru, who purveys the Word and reveals the Name, attains an almost divine status in the eyes of the believer. The situation is something like the one described in a familiar couplet attributed to Kabir. In it a believer finds himself simultaneously in the presence of God and his guru: which should he bow to first? The believer solves the predicament by saying that he should first show reverence to his guru since the guru points him, in turn, to God.

To outsiders it sometimes seems that Nanak's pupils, his Sikhs, have come close to making the same choice. But if there is an ele-

ment of Nanak-olatry in the Sikh community, it is not the simple-minded apotheosizing of a particular man. When one looks at the Sikh scriptures one finds that the name Nanak denotes not just one man but a class: all the gurus in his lineage who composed poetry that was collected in the *Adi Granth*. They all sign their poems, as is characteristic in the *pad* genre that is the backbone of the *Adi Granth* and most medieval north Indian devotional poetry, and remarkably, they all sign their poems with a single name—Nanak's. (Divisions in the text indicate which "Nanak" is which.) So Nanak, the guru, is not just a person but a principle. Hence it is fitting that the Book itself be understood as tantamount to the Guru, and that, indeed, is what Sikhs do. It is said that Gobind Singh, the tenth guru, was responsible for declaring that after him the lineage of gurus was at an end; in its place would be the guidance provided directly by the *Granth*.

It is the Word, the uttering of the Name, that makes Nanak Nanak for Sikhs, and it is at least in part for that reason that no Sikh house of worship contains an image of Nanak, an individual human being. The Book, which contains the words of other "Nanaks" and the words of other saints such as Kabir and Ravidas, is honored with all the ceremony that would attend his image if it were there: offerings of flowers and food, great fannings and circumambulations, and the placing of a canopy overhead. Readers of the Book (*granthis*) even perform the traditional priestly role of collecting food that, when blessed by the presence of the Book, will become *prasad* to be eaten by devotees. Here the aural transposition of Hindu practice is complete. The Word, the Book, is the ultimate guru, and when Sikhs insist on calling the house of worship that holds it a *gurudvara* ("door to the guru") rather than a temple, they mean that the Book is there.

This exaltation of word and book is not, however, universal among all who profess themselves followers of Nanak. There are communities inspired by Nanak that do not quite fit inside normative Sikhism. Important among them are the Udasi ascetics—their name says they are "withdrawers"—who trace their lineage back to Nanak through his second son, Sricand. Sricand, they believe, considered himself to be his father's rightful successor and resigned himself to the ascetic life when he was passed over in favor of someone outside the family. For some time a close tie apparently

persisted between those who followed Sricand and those who embraced the succession of gurus claimed by the Sikhs, and through the early decades of the twentieth century the Udasis remained the custodians of many of the major Sikh shrines.<sup>29</sup>

In Udasi monasteries, quite by contrast to Sikh *gurudvaras*, a tradition of image veneration is preserved: an icon of Sricand, the founding guru, is found in each and is the object of devotional attention. This does not place the Udasis outside the Nanak Panth or even altogether outside the community of Sikhs. The *Japji*, a collection of poems by Nanak that begins the *Adi Granth* and is daily recited by observant Sikhs, provides the verses used in the initiation of Udasi novices.<sup>30</sup> And a good proportion of those novices are recruited from families of the Jat caste, the same that forms such an important part of the Sikh community.

Still, there is a difference, and it is not just the obvious difference between celibacy among the Udasis and householdership among the Sikhs. To walk into an Udasi monastery is to enter a world not too dissimilar from that of the Kabir Panth; there is even the oddity that a fair emphasis is placed on instruction in Sanskrit, despite the fact that the great words of the tradition are in the vernacular.<sup>31</sup> To walk into a Sikh *gurudvara* is something else altogether. Here the religion of the Word—the vernacular Word—is absolutely paramount. People come in the early morning hours of every day to hear the reading of the Book, and they come at intervals, if time and inclination permit, until evening.

They may have to come and go quickly, and if they do, they reduce the ritual to its core. They prostrate before the Book, make an offering before it, circumambulate it, receive from in front of it the food of grace (*prasad*, which in Sikh *gurudvaras* is a mixture of flour, clarified butter, and sugar), and depart. But for the Book that serves as its axis, this sequence would seem an entirely Hindu pattern: every step replicates the worship that normally surrounds Hindu images. Yet the context makes it different. There is an air of quiet that really does remind one more of a mosque than of a temple, and the strongly congregational feeling that obtains in the room where such a ritual takes place reinforces the impression. People who can stay awhile spread themselves around the room to think, to listen together, to sing. As the “reader” (*granthi*) cares for the Book, three “cantors” (*ragis*) lead the crowd in singing poems from the *Adi Granth*, and

anyone who knows the lines is welcome to join. “By listening,” Nanak says, come a host of benefits, and “by pondering” and “by singing” too.

On the face of it, it seems improbable that some of the same people who intone these admonitions to listen, sense God’s order, and submit, could then pledge themselves to acts of terrorism and violence. But every religion has its varying textures—and fringes—and there is a seriousness of purpose and sense of deep belonging in Sikh worship that serves as a resource for the whole community when it feels threatened. This conviction lends itself to the dedicated defense of order when that order is perceived as good, and it fuels the fires of destruction if the prevailing order is judged defective, damaging, or unfair.

## POEMS OF NANAK

I

*Omkar*

True name  
 Person who creates  
 Beyond fear and opposition  
 A form beyond time  
 Unborn, self-born  
 The guru's grace.

Repeat this.

The ancient truth, ageless truth  
 Is also, now, truth.  
 And Nanak says,  
 It will always be truth.

[Ek Omkar, the root mantra]

By order  
 shapes take shape—  
 An order  
 that cannot be uttered—  
 By order  
 creatures live;  
 By order  
 each finds its status;  
 By order  
 high or low;

By written order  
 joy or sadness.  
 By order  
 some are given alms;  
 By order  
 others ever wander.  
 Under that order  
 is all that is;  
 Beyond that order,  
 nothing.  
 Nanak says,  
 to understand that order  
 Is to say goodbye to  
 "I".

[Japji 2]

From listening,  
 Siddhas, Pirs, Gods, Naths—  
 the spiritually adept;

From listening,  
 the earth, its white foundation,  
 and the sky;

From listening,  
 continents, worlds, hells;

From listening,  
 death cannot approach.

Nanak says,  
 those who hear  
 flower forever.

From listening,  
 sin and sorrow  
 disappear.

[Japji 8]

From listening,  
Siva, Brahma, Indra—  
the gods;

From listening,  
great leadership:  
dullards become worthy of praise.

From listening,  
the yogic yoke leads  
to secrets of the body;

From listening,  
Sastras and Smrti,  
Vedas—sacred words.

Nanak says,  
those who hear  
flower forever.

From listening,  
sin and sorrow  
disappear.

[Japji 9]

From listening,  
truth, fulfillment, knowledge;

From listening,  
the virtue of bathing  
in all the holy places;

From listening,  
effortlessly  
one gains a sense of worth;

From listening,  
spontaneously  
meditation arises.

Nanak says,  
those who hear  
flower forever.

From listening,  
sin and sorrow  
disappear.

[Japji 10]

From listening,  
a depth, a well of virtues;

From listening,  
Sheikh, Pir, Badshah—  
those revered as masters;

From listening,  
the blind find the way;

From listening,  
the endless ocean  
in the measure of a hand;

Nanak says,  
those who hear  
flower forever.

From listening,  
sin and sorrow  
disappear.

[Japji 11]

The way one ponders it  
cannot be described;

Those who try  
should recant, apologize.

No paper, no pen, no scribe

Can capture or comprehend  
the magnificence of pondering it.

That name—  
so immaculately clear—  
only the mind that ponders it  
can truly be aware.

[Japji 12]

If you ponder it,  
there is mindfulness, wisdom of mind;

If you ponder it,  
the whole of the universe is known;

If you ponder it,  
you will never face harm;

If you ponder it,  
you will never walk the way of death.

That name—  
so immaculately clear—  
only the mind that ponders it  
can truly be aware.

[Japji 13]

If you ponder it,  
no obstacle blocks your path;

If you ponder it,  
you openly show your honor;

If you ponder it,  
you will walk life's way with zeal;

If you ponder it,  
to the righteous life you'll be bound.

That name—  
so immaculately clear—  
only the mind that ponders it  
can truly be aware.

[Japji 14]

If you ponder it,  
you find the door of deliverance;

If you ponder it,  
the family prospers;

If you ponder it,  
you are transformed,  
and can teach transformation;

If you ponder it,  
Nanak says, you never stand in need.

That name—  
so immaculately clear—  
only the mind that ponders it  
can truly be aware.

[Japji 15]

Beyond number  
 are the fools, who simply cannot see;  
 Beyond number  
 are the thieves, thriving on deceit;  
 Beyond number  
 are the tyrants, the ones who rule by force;  
 Beyond number  
 are the murderers who kill by cutting throats;  
 Beyond number  
 are the sinners: sin is all they do;  
 Beyond number  
 are the liars, spreading worthless trash;  
 Beyond number  
 are the barbarians: they eat filth for food;  
 Beyond number  
 are those who slander: the weight their heads must bear!  
 So says Nanak, the lowly—  
 These thoughts I've uttered  
 though I've yet to sacrifice  
 myself to you.  
 The things that please you—  
 these things go well.  
 You are evermore,  
 secure,  
 and beyond all form.

[Japji 18]

The guru is the stepping stone,  
 The guru is the boat,  
 the guru is the raft of Hari's name.

The guru is the lake, the sea,  
 The guru is the ship,  
 the guru is the place to ford the stream.

Would you like to glisten  
 in the lake that's made of truth?  
 Go then and bathe in that name.

[Siri ragu 9.3]

If the True Guru is gracious  
 trust becomes complete.  
 If the True Guru is gracious  
 no one ever wastes away.  
 If the True Guru is gracious  
 trouble is a thing unknown.  
 If the True Guru is gracious  
 one is painted with God's hue.  
 If the True Guru is gracious  
 how could there be fear of death?  
 If the True Guru is gracious  
 one is given instant joy.  
 If the True Guru is gracious  
 one finds life's nine great jewels.  
 If the True Guru is gracious  
 one mingles with the Truth.

[Var majh, pauri 25]

Nights, seasons, dates, times,  
air, water, fire, hell:  
In the midst of this is the earth,  
a place to rest from travel and practice religion,  
And in it there are manifold lives—  
names without number, names without end—  
They act. And when they act, notice is taken  
by Someone who is true, whose court rules true,  
Whose council of just ones radiates light  
as the Vigilant One sets his mark on our deeds.  
Well done or ill done—the verdict is found.  
So says Nanak in chant and song.

[Japji 34]

That was the religion of the realm of religion,  
but now the realm of wisdom:  
How many forces—air, water, fire?  
How many Krishnas and Sivas are there?  
How many Brahmans have shaped what's been shaped  
in all its color and form?  
How many worlds? How many Mount Merus?  
How many sermons to Dhruv?  
How many Indras? Suns and moons?  
How many regions and lands?  
How many Siddhas? Buddhas? Naths?  
And how many kinds of goddess?  
How many gods and demons? Sages?  
How many jewels in how many seas?  
How many continents? How many languages?  
How many masters and kings?  
How many who worship, how many who serve?  
Nanak says:  
no end, no end.

[Japji 35]

In the realm of wisdom, wisdom reigns  
with resonance, pleasure, festivity, and joy,  
But the sound of the realm of effort is form—  
beautiful shapes are shaped there,  
quite beyond compare.  
No words can describe it,  
and those who try will repent.  
Attentiveness, insight, thought, and mind  
are also given shape; and there is shaped  
the purity of sages and gods.

[Japji 36]

In the realm of action the sound is pure force:  
there, there is nothing, nothing else.  
There, there are warriors with heroic strength,  
whose being is suffused with Ram;  
There, there are Sitas—Sitas in majesty,  
whose beauty is more than can be told.  
Since Ram dwells inside, they are never robbed  
or deceived; they never die.  
There dwell worlds of lovers of God,  
whose actions brings happiness; truth is in their minds.

The realm of truth: there dwells the Formless One.  
He makes, and seeing what is made, is pleased.  
There, there are universes, regions, realms,  
and to try to speak of them—no end, no end.  
There are worlds and worlds, worlds and shapes,  
and whatever he commands, they do.  
He looks on them, thrives on them, gives them his thought.  
Nanak says, to tell it is as hard as iron.

[Japji 37]

Discipline is the workshop;  
patience, the goldsmith;  
the anvil, one's thinking;  
wisdom, the hammer;  
Fear, the bellows;  
austerities, the fire;  
and feeling, the vessel  
    where the deathless liquid is poured.

In such a true mint  
is forged the Word,  
and those on whom He looks  
    do their rightful deeds.

Nanak says:  
the One who sees,  
sees.  
    He observes.

[Japji 38]



## FIVE

# Mirabai

*I'm colored with the color of dusk, oh Rana,  
colored with the color of my Lord.*

WE COME AT LAST to a saint who is a woman, but this is hardly the first time we have heard a woman speak. Many of Kabir's songs of longing are voiced as if by a woman waiting for her faraway lover, and the same is true of Sur's. By assuming the female role, these male poets cultivated the capacity for the intense emotion that they and their culture supposed to be the particular province of women, and also the sense of homebound captivity that produced it. They understood a woman's gift for feeling to be a *bhakti* virtue and willingly stripped themselves of the status that went with their male rank to learn what true feeling meant. The sense of confinement, even helplessness before the larger world, that is the lot of many Indian women seemed a natural metaphor for much of what human beings experience in relation to God: a mood of loss and bewilderment in the face of a beloved being who is freer and more powerful than we. To be sure, India has developed images of womanhood that contrast broadly to this one—it applies the title Power (*sakti*) to many of its goddesses and it recognizes that human women can be far more threatening to the men in their lives than their position in society would imply—but the image of the tenacious woman whose strength is learned in love and suffering was the one that seemed most relevant to the religious needs of male figures in the *bhakti* world.

The female persona through which these poets spoke was always just that, however: a persona. Tradition might protest that the wom-

only voice these poets adopted was the true one, the sound of the inner self, but the plain fact remains that the poets were men. They had to go through all the work of "becoming" women to experience God as husband and lover. With Mirabai, by contrast, no sexual transformation was necessary, and the consequences of that fact were many.

### Mira's Fame

In the first place, she attained enormous celebrity. Just as Antal, the only woman among the Alvar poet-saints of south India, is the one whose verse and life story are best known of all the Alvars', so Mira's poems are probably the most often quoted of any north Indian saint, and her biography the most familiar. More than any other saint with the possible exception of Kabir, she has become a pan-Indian figure. Her songs are sung all the way to the southernmost tip of the sub-continent by people who otherwise have little command of Hindi, and in fact some of the most popular renditions in recent times have been made by a south Indian vocal performer, M. S. Subbalaxmi. Subbalaxmi is a woman, and her recording of selections from Mira is intense and personal; it is one of the most influential discs of Hindu religious music ever produced.<sup>1</sup> For sheer numbers of copies sold, of course, it has plenty of competitors in the music that emerges from India's huge film industry, but there too Mira has made her mark. Not that she is the only *bhakti* saint to have become the subject of a feature-length movie—one could say the same for every poet in this book—but Mira's story has been enacted ten times on the screen, in a succession of films that goes back to the earliest days of sound cinematography in India.<sup>2</sup> Once M. S. Subbalaxmi herself played the leading role.<sup>3</sup>

There are other signs of Mira's popularity. In Pune, in the western state of Maharashtra, an institution called St. Mira's School has developed a whole philosophy of education that sets it apart from most Indian schools. Founded in 1933 in Hyderabad, in present-day Pakistan, by a visionary named T. L. Vaswani, the Mira Movement in Education called for the sort of training Vaswani believed would make sense for girls. He insisted that one must educate the whole person, not just the mind, so he attempted to inculcate not just

formal learning but purity, prayer, simplicity, and service—virtues that he saw exemplified in "the queen saint" Mirabai, whom he held up as a beacon to his young charges.<sup>4</sup> Every day, beneath huge portraits of him and of Mira, and before little dioramas that illustrate what it means to be kind to brother dog and mother cow, hundreds of neatly uniformed girls assemble for the school's "sanctuary" hour. There in flawless unison they recite a chapter from the *Bhagavad Gita*, sing the songs of the saints—often Mira's songs—and reaffirm their dedication to God, school, and world in the words of their school song, "I Would Be Simple."<sup>5</sup> In St. Mira's College for Girls, a glistening campus some distance away, older girls celebrate Vaswani's founding vision with a ceremony that begins at 5:00 A.M. each June 4th. An hour of Mira's songs serves as the centerpiece for readings from the world's great scriptures on that day, and at other points in the school year—for instance, on the occasion of Krishna's birthday some months later—students enact incidents from Mira's life.<sup>6</sup>

If one goes to Brindavan, the town in Braj that serves as the principal pilgrimage center for devotees of Krishna, one finds another memento of Mira. It is in the form of a temple dedicated to her, which was established in the middle of the nineteenth century by one of the chief ministers of the state of Bikaner, in Mira's native region, Rajasthan. It is a lovely little temple built around a courtyard draped with dense green foliage, and it has become a regular stop on the pilgrim route. This temple is not just memorial in nature, but sacramental. The central deity is Krishna, of course, and to his left is an image of Radha, his favorite consort. To his right, however, stands another female figure—apparently another consort, a counterpart to Radha. This is Mira herself, and not a few people think of her in just this way.<sup>7</sup>

Nowhere is this sentiment more evident than in Rajasthan, the region of deserts, rocks, and fortresslike princely kingdoms to the west of Delhi that is said to have been Mira's home. There in Merta, the town that claims her birth, a huge, gaily lit temple proclaims her fame, and during the summer rainy season pilgrims pack themselves so densely inside that when they join together to sing her songs the sound is deafening. Once again, the temple is formally dedicated to Krishna, Mira's chosen Lord, but an auxiliary shrine is devoted to her, and it is there that most of the music and dancing takes place. The building is supposed to commemorate the site where Mira her-

self prayed as a little girl in her grandfather's house, and its compound also includes the place where she was married. All over Rajasthan bards, traveling singers, and ordinary people sing of "the one from Merta," and though there is a characteristic tone of affection that goes with knowing she is one of their own, there is also a tendency to suggest that she was somehow more than human.

Mira's special, even divine, status among *bhakti* saints has directly to do with her sex. For her, womanhood before God was no religious conceit, but a total identity. So those who treasure Mira's songs often feel that her words have an authenticity that no male poet can match. It transports her to a different level in the eyes of those who look upon her legends and sing her songs. For them, and to a large extent for the poet as well, the distinction between Mira and the *gopis* who form Krishna's inner circle is blurred. Owing to her sex, she belongs with them in a way that Sur never can, and the thin membrane that separates her world from theirs seems often to disappear.<sup>8</sup> When the voice is Mira's, the audience frequently cannot tell whether Mira is speaking for herself or through the voice of one of the *gopis*. Either both things are true and Mira speaks on two levels, or one has to assume that Mira herself has become a member of the charmed circle. And if this is the case, it raises the question of whether she really has her feet planted on this earth at all.

### History and Hagiography

The question is an important one, for not only do we lack a reliable historical frame to associate with Mira's life, we also lack a corpus of poetry that can convincingly be associated with a historical person. Only 22 poems bearing Mira's signature have so far been found in manuscripts predating 1700, and 15 of these are currently unlocatable. More important still, only two of the 22 go back to the sixteenth century. One of these occurs in the *Adi Granth*, so we know that Mira must have had a fair reputation at the beginning of the seventeenth century when it was compiled, and Nabhadas's *Bhaktamal*, the oldest extant hagiographical statement concerning Mira, dates from the same period. But where are the rest of the poems?<sup>9</sup>

At present it is hard to give a satisfying answer. One possibility is that as a woman Mira was excluded from the devotional anthologies

that began to take shape around the turn of the seventeenth century. But if sex was the obstacle, one wonders how Mira gained such widespread acceptance a century or two later. Another possibility is that her poetry, which is definitely closer to the folk idiom than any other we have explored, was regarded as insufficiently "poetic" to be preserved in writing. In that case it would have been the preserve of bardic groups and circles of female singers, who were not literate. Evidently her life story would also have been told—and also, often, in verse—by these same groups, for the legend of Mira colors her poetry more than is the case with any of the other *bhakti* poets. And that raises a final possibility: perhaps the large quantity of poetry now bearing Mira's signature grew up, in the course of time, as a response to the existence of her well-known legend.

Whichever explanation we choose, we seem to be left with a group of poems whose date of composition is so late that they can scarcely provide a check on the accuracy of Mira's biography. They must have been written by other "Miras" than the original one, if ever indeed she existed at all. In such a situation all we can do is listen critically to what the legends say, and for that purpose the oldest is probably the best. It is Nabhadas's brief sketch:

Mira unraveled the fetters of family;  
she sundered the chains of shame to sing  
of her mountain-lifting Lover and Lord.  
Like a latter-day *gopi*, she showed the meaning  
of devotion in our devastated age.  
She had no fear. Her impervious tongue  
intoned the triumphs of her artful Lord.  
Villains thought it vile. They set out to kill her,  
but not even a hair on her head was harmed,  
For the poison she took turned elixir in her throat.  
She cringed before none: she beat love's drum.  
Mira unraveled the fetters of family;  
she sundered the chains of shame to sing  
of her mountain-lifting Lover and Lord.<sup>10</sup>

Although several major themes make their appearance here, one needs the extended commentary of Priyadas (A.D. 1712) before Mira's hagiography really becomes clear. Priyadas's life of Mira is the oldest full narration that has come down to us, and it is one of the liveliest

in his large anthology. His central focus, like that of Nabhadas, is on a woman ever at loggerheads with the segment of society that matters most to an Indian woman: her family. It was not her natal family that presented the problem but the family into which she married. Yet since north Indian custom decrees that marriage—particularly a girl's marriage—take place at an early age, and since the girl is ever after expected to regard her husband's family as her own, Mira's struggles with her husband and his family essentially occupied her entire life.

As the story goes, the problem was desperately simple. Ever since she was a little girl, Mira knew perfectly well whom she wanted to have for a husband—Krishna—and no earthly man could compete. The form of the deity that had particularly won her affection was Krishna Giridhar, the "Lifter of the Mountain," and this title recurs in countless poems attributed to her. It is a youthful, heroic, protective aspect of Krishna, and one very widely worshiped in Rajasthan.<sup>11</sup> The story it commemorates is one in which Krishna as a young man held aloft Mount Govardhan, the symbolic center of Braj, to shield the cattle and cowherds of the region from the wrath of the rain-god Indra. It was Krishna who had provoked Indra to anger in the first place, by urging the Braj people to turn their devotional attentions away from the quixotic sky-god, captain of the old Vedic pantheon, and toward the mountain itself, which symbolized the nourishment and prosperity that were already in their midst. The mountain, as it turned out, was a form of Krishna. When Indra rained down his resentment for seven days and nights, Krishna countered by raising his mountainous umbrella above the heads of those he loved. Priyadas reports that Mira had a personal image of Krishna in this mountain-lifting guise, and that she repaired to him for protection herself.

Such protection was necessary because, as she saw it, to be devoted to Krishna meant that no other devotion was possible. Given her own preference she would have eschewed marriage, but she had no control over such matters. In Rajasthan, today as in the sixteenth century, marriages are arranged; and she had no choice but to go through with it. So she converted the marriage to her own purposes. When her Rajput family, the rulers of Merta, betrothed her to the son of a princely family from another Rajput state, she merely went through the motions. She followed her youthful hus-

band around the marriage fire as tradition dictated she must, but the mantras she said in her heart as she did so tied her for life to a different youth, the one she called the Mountain Lifter. When it came time for her to depart for her new home, similarly, she was uninterested in taking along the requisite dowry. All she wanted to have at her side was her image of Krishna.

What she did when she arrived at the palace of her new family was even more appalling to them: she refused to bow her head to her mother-in-law when the older woman greeted her at the threshold, and she refused to bow to the goddess who was the family's chosen deity. To have done so, she felt, would have compromised her fealty to Krishna. These acts caused humiliation to her mother-in-law, shame to her father-in-law and her husband, and discredit to her own father's lineage as well.

Never content with the family that marriage had given her, Princess Mira proceeded to replace it with another, "the company of the saints" (*sadhu sang*) who were "attached to the will of Syam," that is, Krishna.<sup>12</sup> Her sisters-in-law tried to dissuade her from associating with wandering mendicants and religious enthusiasts—hardly the proper involvement for a woman sheltered inside the palace—but to no avail, and before long the *rana* took action by dispatching to Mira a cup of poison intended to bring an end to such disgraceful behavior. Whether Priyadas means Mira's husband or her father-in-law when he uses the term *rana* ("king" or "ruler") is not entirely certain, but the latter may be more likely, since Mira's father-in-law would have been head of the house.<sup>13</sup> More recent versions of the story have seen it the other way around, however, attributing this heinous act to Mira's husband, or blaming it on an evil brother-in-law.

Whoever it was, the action failed. The poison was sent in the guise of a liquid offering (*caranamrt*) to the feet of Krishna, Mira's deity, with the foreknowledge that Mira would be bound by Hindu practice to consume whatever was left over from the table of her divine Lord as *prasad*. But as she dutifully drank it, the poison became *caranamrt* indeed: "immortal liquid from his feet." Not only did she emerge unscathed from the wicked draft, she glowed with an even greater health and happiness than she had before.

This is the central event in Mira's life story and the one to which everyone from Nabhadas on makes reference. Other events tend to

be patterned after it. Some later versions of Mira's biography have the *rana* sending her a snake when the cup of poison failed, but again to no avail: the asp transformed itself into a rock holy to Krishna (*salagram*) that Mira honored on her altar. According to another story, this one told by Priyadas himself, Mira was overheard one day as she whispered affectionately to Krishna behind her closed door. Her in-laws quickly concluded that some secret liaison had been detected, and the *rana* (again, the ambiguity between husband and father-in-law persists) raced to the door to avenge the family honor. Sword in hand, he demanded to be admitted to Mira's chamber and see the man with whom she had been conversing so sweetly. She opened the door and replied that the man with whom he desired to speak was standing directly in front of him—Krishna, her image—and that he was never one to shy away from a confrontation, at which point the *rana*, flustered and angry, froze "like a picture on the wall." Thus the gross reality paled in strength before the subtle: the living *rana* turned to stone while Krishna was shown to be much more than an image, more than "real life" itself.<sup>14</sup>

In time, Mira escaped the confines of her earthly family to join the larger family she had embraced. She traveled to Brindavan to join the "company of saints" gathered around Krishna there, but again a confrontation ensued. This time her opponent was none other than the great Krishnaite theologian Jiv Gosvami, with whom she wished to speak about matters of faith.<sup>15</sup> Jiv refused. He had undertaken a vow to think only of Krishna and never, therefore, to have concourse with a woman, since that would be apt to distract him from his holy thoughts. Mira was incensed at this attitude and let it be known that as far as she could see there was only one male in all of Brindavan, and it wasn't Jiv. Before Krishna, she implied, the rest of the world is female. Jiv saw the point and relented, and Mira stayed some time in Brindavan as the focus of a large circle of devotees who gathered around her in song.

The final journey in Mira's life took her in the opposite direction from her native Rajasthan—west to the great temple of Krishna in Dvaraka, on the shores of the Arabian Sea, to serve her Lord once again. When she had been gone for some time the *rana* finally missed her. He recognized that she was the very "personification of love," and sent a delegation of Brahmins to bid her return.<sup>16</sup> She resisted, of course, and the Brahmins found themselves driven to

extremes in their effort to carry out their mission: they went on a hunger strike. This did indeed earn Mira's sympathy, and she prepared to go home, but as she did so, Krishna intervened. One day, as she worshiped in the temple, he drew her into his own image, and she was never seen again. Although Mira herself was at last willing to explore the possible coexistence of earthly propriety and heavenly devotion, her Lord could not bear to see her try.

This, then, is the outline of Mira's story, but because of the fascination it exerts throughout north India there have been a number of expansions and modifications since Priyadas's time. First and most important, there has been a tendency to specify that the family into which Mira married was the ruling house of Cittor, a city in southwestern Rajasthan known for its defiantly proud Rajput heritage. More than that, she has been given a historical husband. Apparently the first choice was Rana Kumbha, one of the great heroes and builders of Cittor, but when it was realized that his dates preceded those of the man in Merta whom tradition had come to recognize as Mira's father, a later prince of Cittor received the honor, a sixteenth-century figure named Bhojraj.<sup>17</sup>

Once such an honorable historical marriage had been arranged, it became necessary to extricate the groom from the opprobrium he would have earned as a would-be murderer of his wife. For this purpose Bhojraj was perfect, since in fact he soon disappeared from history. It was proposed that his marriage to Mira occurred shortly before he died, and that one of his younger brothers was responsible for the attempts on Mira's life. In several versions of Mira's life, including the one that has become standard comic-book fare in the Amar Chitra Katha series, this has a most desirable effect. Mira can be said to be "an ideal Hindu wife" with respect to Bhojraj<sup>18</sup>—an astonishing reversal of Priyadas's picture—and still retain the enmity she expresses in so many poems toward the *rana* who tried to poison her.

Another alteration that may have been made to improve Mira's image as a wife may be seen in Priyadas's report that Mira was once set upon by a man who pretended to be a wandering ascetic come to sing Krishna's praises in Mira's devotional group, but who actually had less elevated matters on his mind. One day he confronted Mira with amorous advances and claimed that the Mountain Lifter had commanded she submit. Fearlessly Mira complied, offering the man

food and preparing a bed for them to use; but this she laid out in the presence of the worshiping company before she urged her forward guest to have a good time. Faced with so many eyes, it was not she but he who blanched with shame. He lost all desire for corporeal contact and begged Mira to help him attain the godly devotion she displayed.

The story has an uplifting ending, but it must have seemed risky to subsequent generations, because it has been omitted from many accounts of Mira's life. As Mira became a symbol of devoted womanhood in general—both religious and secular, or domestic—she lost some of the latitude she once had in demonstrating how freely one might respond when the intensity of *bhakti* led to situations that offended ordinary morality. Such offense was minimized. One particularly instructive page in the comic-book version of Mira's life, in fact, shows that her extraordinary faith could be altogether reconciled with an exemplary home life. In the foreground and in color we see Mira tending dutifully to the needs of her husband; only when these have been fulfilled does she slip away into the background frame, into the shadows of black and white, to serve her other Mate.<sup>19</sup> No mention is made, of course, of Mira's resistance to the idea of sharing Bhojraj's bed—this is a publication intended for young minds.

But this portrait is an extreme. The drama of Mira's defiance of the expectations of ordinary womanhood is still at the core of her legend as usually told, and no one has ever dared to suggest that she was anything but a virgin. Motherhood and Mira don't mix. Most changes in the myth of Mira have been in the nature of elaboration rather than revision, and many serve merely to associate motifs in her story with places people can visit today. Temples once dedicated to other divinities have been converted to Mira shrines in Cittor and the neighboring city of Udaipur,<sup>20</sup> and in the Mira temple in Brindavan one can now view the very *salagram* stone that once appeared before her in a much more threatening form.<sup>21</sup> As the sign there says, in Hindi and in capital letters in English,

THIS TEMPLE IS BUILT ON THE RESIDENCE OF THE TOPMOST  
SAINT MEERA BAI, BY THAKUR RAM NARAYAN SINGH.  
RAJDIVAN OF BIKANER ON 1842. IN THE MIDDLE SHRI  
KRISHNA, LEFT SHRI RADHA, RIGHT SHREE MEERA. MOVE-

ABLE RADHA KRISHNA IS ON THE LOWER THORNE AND TO  
RIGHT THEM IS THE SHALIGRAM FOR WHOM IT IS FAMOUS  
THAT IT IS THE VERY SHALIGRAM, CONVERTED FROM THE  
SNAKE SENT BY RANA, TO BITE MEERA. THE MANAGEMENT OF  
THIS TEMPLE DEPENDS UPON YOU. THEREFORE TO MAKE  
THIS PEACEFUL, CALM AND CHARMING ATMOSPHERE  
ETERNAL DONATE YOUR DONATION IN THE DONATION BOX  
AND OBEY THE ORDER GIVEN BY SHRI KRISHNA IN GEETA  
(CHAPTER-XVII VERSE-20).

The relevant verse in the *Bhagavad Gita* assures visitors who wish to consult it that Krishna values any gift that is offered purely out of the sense that one ought to give, rather than with the expectation of getting something in return. And on Krishna's behalf, indeed, the priests at Mira's temple are willing to accept gifts of any order. But they do have definite ideas about how the urge to generosity will normally manifest itself among different classes of people, and are not reluctant to say so.

### Themes in the Poetry

Many of the themes and emphases in poetry attributed to Mira correspond closely to what we have in the compositions of the other *bhakti* saints. Mira speaks of the importance of the name of God;<sup>22</sup> she praises the True Guru;<sup>23</sup> she uses nautical imagery to characterize what it is to cross "the sea of existence;"<sup>24</sup> she underscores the importance of sharing the company of other worshipers (*sants, sadhus, bhaktas*);<sup>25</sup> and there are times when she indulges in the sort of self-denigration that points by contrast to the greater glory of God.<sup>26</sup>

But there are strains in Mira's poetry that would seem distinctly out of place if one encountered them in the poems of Kabir, say, or Sur. One such strain is the close resemblance in style between many poems that bear Mira's signature and the often anonymous folk compositions sung by women in Rajasthan and elsewhere. These are generally simple in format, involving a great deal of repetition, as one might expect in a round or a refrain, and they take up themes that belong typically to women. Mira's poetry too tends to be sim-

ple, with ample repetition, and it often mentions family tensions, or the emotions a bride might feel, or festivals confined to women.<sup>27</sup> One also finds in her work such typically female genres of poetry as songs depicting the various characteristics of the twelve months and songs describing the coming of the rains, when one's man is not yet home and the roads become impassible.<sup>28</sup> These moods and genres are not entirely absent from poems composed by men and put into the mouths of women, but in Mira they are particularly pronounced. Considering our inability to isolate a body of poetry composed by a historical Mirabai or even by close associates in a "school" that might have grown up around her, this osmosis between "Mira" on the one hand and folk poetry on the other is easy to understand.

Another distinctive tendency in poems attributed to Mira concerns the line separating Mira from Krishna's *gopis*. There are poems in the Mira corpus in which this separation is carefully maintained. The poet may even assign herself the status of a maidservant (*manjari*) and watch from the sidelines as love develops between Krishna and Radha, paramount among the *gopis*, as is theologically correct.<sup>29</sup> But when Radha is absent from the scene, as is frequently the case, it is much harder to tell who is speaking, and there are times when it is almost impossible not to conclude that Mira understands herself as a *gopi*. She concludes one poem, for instance, with the following line:

Let Mira, your servant, safely cross over,  
a cowherding Gokul girl.<sup>30</sup>

It is often much harder with Mira than it is with Sur (to choose a parallel *saguna* case) to subtract the poet's signature from the poem and still have it make sense. The line between the internal drama of Braj—the *gopis'* world—and what Mira experiences is not fixed, and grammar often forces the hearer to assume a close link between the two. This is not so with the poets we have studied so far. In poems of Ravidas and Kabir the signature is often cordoned off from the body of the poem by means of the verb "says," a word that appears directly in the text. Or it may just be understood, as is typical in many instances involving Nanak and Sur: only the poet's name appears, and the hearer supplies an implicit "says." With Sur the formal bond between the poet and the world he describes sometimes becomes

stronger, in phrases such as "Sur's Lord" (*sur prabhu*). It is the Lord who acts in the poem, but the poet's presence is suggested indirectly through the use of the genitive. Yet the genitive meaning is only one possibility; usually one can also divide such a phrase so that the "Lord" participates in the drama and the "Sur" merely speaks it. All the hearer needs to do is supply the verb "says" and the poet becomes a mere narrator, formally distinct from the world he describes.

With Mira, however, one often has no choice but to pull the poet directly into the poem. We have already quoted one concluding verse in which this is required, and by far the most frequent formula for ending a Mirabai poem has equal force. In such a poem the whole first half of the final line enters as an indissoluble unit—"Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter"—and the presence of the genitive marker *re* in "Mira's Lord" (*mira re prabhu*, or *mira ke prabhu*, depending on the dialect) makes it impossible to factor her name out of the direct action of the poem by understanding it as the subject of the unexpressed verb "says." It is as if the whole phrase becomes Mira's signature, pulling her, via her Lord, into the world of the poem, which is most often the *gopis'* world. Often other things she says suggest that she is there anyway, not merely in the persona of a *gopi* but as a woman of Rajasthan, someone the *rana* tried to poison; but this clinches the case. And the repeated mention of Krishna in a particular role, as the one who lifts Mount Govardhan, has the effect of further attracting the action described toward Mira herself. The image of Krishna as the Mountain Lifter is the one she holds most dear.<sup>31</sup>

One often has the feeling that because Mira's own biography is of such vivid importance in north India, whoever composed the Mira poems was eager to draw in as much of Mira herself as possible. Clearly this happened when episodes from her own life such as the incident of the cup of poison or the snake made their way into poems she is said to have composed, but it may even be true when the only autobiographical fragment is an expanded version of her signature—something like "Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter." What happened, of course, was that the signature itself, like the rest of the poem, became something to be composed. In the absence of a historical Mira, she too had to be created.

A third distinctive emphasis in poems attributed to Mira has to do with this same set of issues. It is the particular view Mira takes of marriage and yoga in relation to Krishna, a view that is somewhat deviant when measured against much that is standard in Krishnaite doctrine. *Saguna* theology has some pointed things to say about these institutions. Typically it rejects the view that Krishna was married to the *gopis*, reserving that sacrament for a much later stage in his life, when he has assumed the throne of Dvaraka. The *gopis* are his paramours, not his wives, and theirs is therefore a costly, dangerous liaison: they risk the opprobrium of all society, and perhaps worse than opprobrium at the hands of their husbands if their trysts are discovered. With equal vehemence, *saguna* theology rejects the idea that Krishna was in any way an ascetic, a yogi. When Krishna recommends this pose to the *gopis* through Udhro, it is in large measure a joke on Udhro. No one who fools around as much as Krishna does can possibly hope to build a reputation as a yogi, and the *gopis* are quick to say so. For that reason we suspect that it is only a daring metaphor when a go-between reports to Radha that Krishna yearns for her with such unbroken concentration that he has begun to act like a yogi. Or worse: perhaps it's just a ploy to break down her resistance.<sup>32</sup>

In the poems of Mira both these sacred cows—marriage and asceticism—are defiled. Not only does Mira have a tendency to portray herself as wed to Krishna, a theme familiar from her hagiography, but she often depicts her betrothed as a yogi. Whether this marriage actually transpired is another matter. In one much-quoted poem, Mira seems convinced that the wedding happened in a dream in which Krishna appeared to her; in others she longs for the union to take place and describes her bridal readiness.<sup>33</sup> As for Krishna's identity as a yogi, it seems to have much to do with the fact that he is so distant, wandering as if he were an ascetic. Indeed, Rajasthani women's folk poetry sometimes touches on this theme in depicting an absent husband or lover. But here more is involved: Mira is ready to take up the yogi's life herself in order to go where he is.<sup>34</sup> Strangest of all, she imagines this liaison not just as one between a male and female yogi who are fellow travelers, but as an actual marriage between the two—a marriage of yogis, something whose possibility is simply disallowed by basic categories of Hindu

thought.<sup>35</sup> To become a yogi is to leave behind one's marriage and everything that goes with it—family, home, and all: Mira, however, would seem to create a new institution to answer her urges. In doing so, she once again confuses the realms that others hold apart, and once again her audacity seems to have to do with her gender.<sup>36</sup>

*Bhakti* is a force that propels a person beyond the confines of ordinary life. In a man's case such a departure may take the form of imagining one's way into the lives of women, and specifically women who themselves abrogate social norms. This is what happens when Sur takes on the voice of a *gopi*. But if the poet is a woman, the landscape necessarily changes, so a woman who imagines her religious involvements as transgressing the boundaries of ordinary life may well do so in different ways. Rather than accepting the loving profligacy that official *saguna* theology designates as the appropriate avenue of escape from mundane, domestic involvements—a theology, of course, designed by men—she may try something new. She may attempt to forge categories that give new bite to *bhakti* from a woman's point of view. This is what Mira did in demanding for herself a marriage with the world's most eligible and unmarriageable bachelor and in imagining this marriage as taking a form the world regards as impossible: the coupling of two yogis. In Hindu terms a female yogi is already an oddity, since women are so closely identified with home and family. But to compound this aberration with marriage to a yogi whose personality seems to contradict the spirit of yoga in every way is to hatch an act of madness.

Mira says that the world did indeed call her mad—mad with love—and no wonder.<sup>37</sup> Whoever she was, whether a historical individual, a collective, mythical projection, or some combination of the two, she fired the imagination with her fearless defiance. In one respect she is revered as Krishna's spiritual wife, as quiet and humble and self-sacrificing as any woman could be expected to be in relation to her "husband-god" (*patidev*), but in another sense she is celebrated as the kind of person who shattered complacencies wherever she went, particularly by making it clear that the world's conception of a woman's place is not always a place one wants to be. In both these aspects, and as the only one of her gender to have earned a place on the honor roll of north Indian *bhakti* saints, she exerts a fascination that none of her male counterparts can match.

## POEMS OF MIRABAI

I'm colored with the color of dusk, oh *rana*,  
     colored with the color of my Lord.  
 Drumming out the rhythm on the drums, I danced,  
     dancing in the presence of the saints,  
     colored with the color of my Lord.  
 They thought me mad for the Maddening One,  
     raw for my dear dark love,  
     colored with the color of my Lord.  
 The *rana* sent me a poison cup:  
     I didn't look, I drank it up,  
     colored with the color of my Lord.  
 The clever Mountain Lifter is the lord of Mira.  
     Life after life he's true—  
     colored with the color of my Lord.

[Caturvedi, no. 37]

Life without Hari is no life, friend,  
 And though my mother-in-law fights,  
     my sister-in-law teases,  
     the *rana* is angered,  
 A guard is stationed on a stool outside,  
     and a lock is mounted on the door,  
 How can I abandon the love I have loved  
     in life after life?  
 Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter:  
     Why would I want anyone else?

[Caturvedi, no. 42]

Today your Hari is coming,  
     my friend,  
     to play the game of Spring.  
 The harbinger crow in the courtyard speaks,  
     my friend,  
     an omen of good times ahead.  
 All the cowherds have gathered in the garden,  
     my friend,  
     where the basil grows:  
 I hear the sound of tambourines and drums,  
     my friend.  
     Why sleep? Wake up and go!  
 There's water and betel-leaf, mats and sheets,  
     my friend.  
     Go greet him: touch his feet.  
 Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter,  
     my friend,  
     the best blessing you could have.

[Sekhavat, no. 76]

I saw the dark clouds burst,  
     dark Lord,  
 Saw the clouds and tumbling down  
     In black and yellow streams  
     they thicken,  
 Rain and rain two hours long.  
 See—  
     my eyes see only rain and water,  
     watering the thirsty earth green.  
 Me—  
     my love's in a distant land  
     and wet, I stubbornly stand at the door,  
 For Hari is indelibly green,  
     Mira's Lord,  
 And he has invited a standing,  
     stubborn love.

[Caturvedi, no. 82]

Hey love bird, crying cuckoo,  
 don't make your crying coos,  
 for I who am crying, cut off from my love,  
 will cut off your crying beak  
 and twist off your flying wings  
 and pour black salt in the wounds.

Hey, I am my love's and my love is mine.  
 How do you dare cry love?  
 But if my love were restored today  
 your love call would be a joy.  
 I would gild your crying beak with gold  
 and you would be my crown.

Hey, I'll write my love a note,  
 crying crow, now take it away  
 and tell him that his separated love  
 can't eat a single grain.  
 His servant Mira's mind's in a mess.  
 She wastes her time crying coos.

Come quick, my Lord,  
 the one who sees inside;  
 without you nothing remains.

[Caturvedi, no. 84]

Murali sounds on the banks of the Jumna,  
 Murali snatches away my mind;  
 My senses cut loose from their moorings—  
 Dark waters, dark garments, dark Lord.  
 I listen close to the sounds of Murali  
 And my body withers away—  
 Lost thoughts, lost even the power to think.  
 Mira's Lord, clever Mountain Lifter,  
 Come quick, and snatch away my pain.

[Caturvedi, no. 166]

The Bhil woman tasted them, plum after plum,  
 and finally found one she could offer him.  
 What kind of genteel breeding was this?  
 And hers was no ravishing beauty.  
 Her family was poor, her caste quite low,  
 her clothes a matter of rags,  
 Yet Ram took that fruit—that touched, spoiled fruit—  
 for he knew that it stood for her love.  
 This was a woman who loved the taste of love,  
 and Ram knows no high, no low.  
 What sort of Veda could she ever have learned?  
 But quick as a flash she mounted a chariot  
 And sped to heaven to swing on a swing,  
 tied by love to God.  
 You are the Lord who cares for the fallen;  
 rescue whoever loves as she did:  
 Let Mira, your servant, safely cross over,  
 a cowherding Gokul girl.

[Caturvedi, no. 186]

Sister, I had a dream that I wed  
 the Lord of those who live in need:  
 Five hundred sixty thousand people came  
 and the Lord of Braj was the groom.  
 In dream they set up a wedding arch;  
 in dream he grasped my hand;  
 in dream he led me around the wedding fire  
 and I became unshakably his bride.  
 Mira's been granted her mountain-lifting Lord:  
 from living past lives, a prize.

[Caturvedi, no. 27]

I have talked to you, talked,  
 dark Lifter of Mountains,  
 About this old love,  
 from birth after birth.  
 Don't go, don't,  
 Lifter of Mountains,  
 Let me offer a sacrifice—myself—  
 beloved,  
 to your beautiful face.  
 Come, here in the courtyard,  
 dark Lord,  
 The women are singing auspicious wedding songs;  
 My eyes have fashioned  
 an altar of pearl tears,  
 And here is my sacrifice:  
 the body and mind  
 Of Mira,  
 the servant who clings to your feet,  
 through life after life,  
 a virginal harvest for you to reap.

[Caturvedi, no. 51]

Go to where my loved one lives,  
 go where he lives and tell him  
 if he says so, I'll color my sari red;  
 if he says so, I'll wear the godly yellow garb;  
 if he says so, I'll drape the part in my hair with pearls;  
 if he says so, I'll let my hair grow wild.  
 Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter:  
 listen to the praises of that king.

[Caturvedi, no. 153]

Oh, the yogi—  
 my friend, that clever one  
 whose mind is on Siva and the Snake,  
 that all-knowing yogi—tell him this:  
 "I'm not staying here, not staying where  
 the land's grown strange without you, my dear,  
 But coming home, coming to where your place is;  
 take me, guard me with your guardian mercy,  
 please.  
 I'll take up your yogic garb—  
 your prayer beads,  
 earrings,  
 begging-bowl skull,  
 tattered yogic cloth—  
 I'll take them all  
 And search through the world as a yogi does  
 with you—yogi and yogini, side by side.

"My loved one, the rains have come,  
 and you promised that when they did, you'd come too.  
 And now the days are gone: I've counted them  
 one by one on the folds of my fingers  
 till the lines at the joints have blurred  
 And my love has left me pale,  
 my youth grown yellow as with age.  
 Singing of Ram,  
 your servant Mira  
 has offered you an offering:  
 her body and her mind."

[Caturvedi, no. 117]

Let us go to a realm beyond going,  
Where death is afraid to go,  
Where the high-flying birds alight and play,  
Afloat in the full lake of love.  
There they gather—the good, the true—  
To strengthen an inner regimen,  
To focus on the dark form of the Lord  
And refine their minds like fire.  
Garbed in goodness—their ankle bells—  
They dance the dance of contentment  
And deck themselves with the sixteen signs  
Of beauty, and a golden crown—  
There where the love of the Dark One comes first  
And everything else is last.

[Caturvedi, no. 193]