



MOTH & THE FLAME
MIRA BAI OF CHITTOR
17

*I seek a Physician who knows the secret
of this world and the next,
That I may tell him of my condition
and be cured of the malady of transmigration.¹*

—Mira Bai



Classical Indian miniature, Mughal style

Our caravan exits Baroda, rolling north up the Grand Trunk Road. The GT Road spans the sub-continent from the mighty Himalayas down to India's southern tip, one of the better contributions of former Mughals and the British Raj, though the GT can also be a hair-raising adventure.

It is my uneasy privilege to ride in the same car with the beloved Master. Uneasy, not because of India's road hazards, but because I have the unmistakable sense that he is peering inside my innermost mind, aware of every uncontrolled thought, every secret. As I experience this tension, somewhere between fear and gratitude, he unexpectedly turns around from the front seat, gives me a quick look and comments, 'Until one can meet the Inner Master and converse with Him at will, outer guidance is necessary.' His sudden words transform into a mantra, a prayer that repeats itself over and over. My yearning for 'at will' communion increases with each breath, each heartbeat.

In the afternoon we stop for lunch by the roadside, beneath the cooling shade of a huge banyan tree that spreads its protecting arms overhead while sending vines—airborne roots, actually—to the earth below. Vivid sap-green wheat fields, patches of bright yellow mustard flowers, and rows of tall sugar cane march into the distance, fenced by spangles of pink and red blooms on cactus hedges. *Basant!* Indian springtime! Beauty abounds in everything!

The Friend carefully peels and cuts a cantaloupe, then personally serves everyone; only then does he himself eat a thin sweet slice.

At dusk, our caravan pauses briefly for chai and leg-stretching in the medieval Rajput city of Chittor. Across the cobbled road and behind the tents of the bazaar, high, orange-red sandstone ramparts of ancient fortresses are gilded by the setting sun. These ancient walls which once held back mighty armies now resound with the twitters and cries of thousands of roosting birds. Calling me to him, Master leans out the car window and asks, 'Do you know that this is Chittor, the place where Princess Mira Bai lived? You know of Mira? She overflowed with love and intoxication of God. Her Guru was Ravi Das, the cobbler-Saint.'

Having already learned to sing two of Mira's hauntingly beautiful Hindi bhajans, Master's history lesson assumes special meaning for me. Mira's songs are among the most poignant and lyric in the rich Sant tradition. The story of her God-inspired life is even part of India's multicultural school curriculum, where children of all religious backgrounds learn her devotional songs by rote.

Master continues, ‘Due to her devotion and worldly indifference, members of her family sought to kill Mira. Her sister-in-law put a poisonous snake in a basket of flowers and sent it as a gift. When Mira accepted, it is said that the snake bowed before her and said, “Fortunate am I to meet a true lover of the Lord.”

‘Mira’s brother-in-law starved a lion, then set it loose on the secluded path Mira walked every day—the path to the temple where she sat for meditation. Upon seeing her, tradition says, the lion bowed his head on her feet; “At last I have found a true devotee! Now I have attained much benefit from having your darshan!”

Master chuckles, ‘This is the outcome of true love for God. Such love has great power, you see. Such love can perform wonders!’

*O All-pervading One, I am dyed in Your color;
When other’s sweethearts live in foreign lands,
They write letter after letter,
But Mira’s Beloved lives in her heart,
And she sings happily day and night.²*

Mira Bai began her quest worshipping the Deity with form—including statues of Krishna—as her early verses attest, but after years of intense search she finally met the great saint Ravi Das and became his disciple. In due course, Mira reached the spiritual pinnacle of Sach Khand. Later songs show her evolution from form to the Formless, her gratitude to Sant Ravi Das, and the efficacy of *Surat Shabd Yoga*—by the practice of which she attained liberation from the otherwise interminable cycle of births and deaths.

*Mira man mani, Surat sahel asmani
Mira is now convinced; her soul soars into the Beyond.*

Ajmeer: We reach Ajmeer late at night. The morning sun uncloaks and gilds ancient palaces, temples, mosques, low mountains, Anasagar Lake, and Ajmeer’s generous people. Sere desert, thorny shrubs, and rocky tan hills surround the old stone city, so typical of Rajasthan. After returning from a long exploratory walk, I find Master sitting at ease in the sun-dappled shadows of a towering mango tree within the spacious walled garden of our hosts, Kartar Chand and family. Only a handful are present and the conversation is relaxed. I watch as a two-year-old child plucks a marigold and toddles near. The Master accepts her flower with sweetness and attention, then lovingly returns it.

‘Why have so many Saints kept unshorn hair and beards?’, I ask.

‘Saints are the worshippers of Nature!’ Master responds vigorously,



In the garden of Kartar Chand, Ajmeer, 1967 (A)

‘Nature intended man to have a natural appearance. Nature is beautiful except when tormented by the hand of man. The beard was provided as protection. Those who keep it rarely experience throat or chest ailments.’ He emphasizes, ‘I’m not advocating or starting any new religion, mind that! Nor am I encouraging anyone to change the society or religion to which they already belong.’

My mind is an open book to him. I have been secretly wanting to follow the Master’s example and keep my own hair unshorn, perhaps even wear a turban. I then express curiosity about the biblical Samson, about whom it was inferred that he derived his superhuman strength from his unshorn hair and his chastity. When he lost both to Delila, he also lost his tremendous power. Master replied obliquely, ‘If a man were to keep his hairs unshorn in the West, he might find employment a problem,’ and adds, ‘Whatever is cut grows again. Even a man who shaves can have progress within, is it not so?’³

I nod in agreement, but continue to wonder. According to certain yogis, uncut hair conducts a subtle energy essential to the practice of *kumbhak yoga*—an obscure practice involving withdrawal of the vital airs or *prana* from the chakras below up to the *sahasrar*—the thousand-petalled lotus in the astral plane. The fruit of this practice can result in a state of suspended animation, superhuman strength, and prolonged life. There are documented cases of kumbhak adepts supporting the full weight of an elephant or a truck on their bare chests. Some have been buried alive for long periods—for weeks and months, then revived. Through kumbhak yoga or even judicious use of breath, one can extend one's lifespan.

'Your *days* are not numbered; your *breaths* are numbered,' Master adds. 'By regulation of breath, life can be prolonged. Conversely, by wasting breath through acts of dissipation, one's lifespan is shortened.'

In contrast to most yoga systems, Sant Mat or the *Surat Shabd Yoga* involves withdrawal of the *surat* or attention, altogether by-passing the treacherous path of breath-control and kundalini (specific yoga techniques which aim to awaken the serpent energy—lying dormant at the base of the spine—the practice of which can generate great heat in the body. Awakening the kundalini prematurely can also lead to insanity). In addition, there are no requirements to shave or not; the practice of anything of a potentially harmful nature is eschewed. The path of the Adepts may be practiced by the physically fit or infirm, the old or young, or by those of any religious background—the 'isms' are left in place. Of the path of the Sound-current, the Master writes:

As a river springing from the snowy peak of a towering mountain flows toward the sea, it undergoes many changes of setting, shape, motion, and appearance, and yet its waters remain the same. If one could discover this audible life-stream within oneself, if one could discover its lower reaches, one could use it as a pathway leading inevitably to its source. The currents might at certain points enter gorges and rapids but nevertheless they are the surest way on the upward journey. Be a range howsoever unscalable, the waters will have cut a pass and carved a passage, and he who will avail himself of their guidance would never fail to find a way. And since this Naam or Word-current springs from the Anaam or the Wordless, he who holds firmly to It will inevitably reach the starting point, transcending plane after plane of varying relativity until he arrives at the very source of name and form; thence to merge into That which has no name or form.⁴

Chisti's Tomb: Ajmeer is renowned for the memory of the great saint, Shaykh Mouinudin Chisti (1136-1236 A.D.), an early Sufi preceptor of *Sultan-ul-Azkar*, as the path of the Celestial Sound-current was then known in the Middle East. Chisti, who was born in Sanjar, Persia, received initiation from his spiritual Master, Khwaja Uthman Haruni in Nishapur. From there, the Saint made a lengthy journey on foot to India, eventually settling in Ajmeer, despite initial opposition from orthodox Hindus.⁵

Between satsangs, I have the opportunity to visit Chisti's tomb with Santokh, who serves as my guide through the old city. Many legends and miraculous stories concerning the great Chisti survive to the present, some no doubt having grown with the telling. Because of his love for the downtrodden, Chisti was known as *Gharib Niwaz*, 'the Abode of the Poor.'

With the passage of centuries, an elaborate mosque and esoteric school was established over Chisti's humble tomb. The twentieth-century Sufi mystic, Pir Inayat Khan, also lived and taught here. Khan was familiar with a branch of the inner science, evidenced in his own words:

It was the Saut-e-Sarmad, the sound of the abstract plane, which Mohammad heard in the cave of Ghar-e-Hira when he became lost in his divine ideal. The Q'uran refers to this sound in the words: 'Be! And all became.' Moses heard this very sound of Mount Sinai, when in communion with God; and the same word was audible to Christ when absorbed in his Heavenly Father in the wilderness. Shiva heard the same Anahad Nada during his Samadhi in the cave of the Himalayas. The sound of the abstract is always going on within, around and about man. Man does not hear it as a rule, because his consciousness is entirely centered in his material existence.

—Pir Inayat Khan, *The Mysticism of Sound*

Santokh and I walk barefoot through the beautiful multi-arched ancient sandstone and marble buildings, aware of a lingering presence. We inspect two gargantuan iron cauldrons ten feet wide and fifteen deep in which tons of rice are cooked every year and sold to hordes of pilgrims who trek from all over India and abroad to attend the celebration of the anniversary of Chisti's birth and death days. The death anniversary is termed *Urs* (literally, 'Wedding Day'), as death, to the lovers of God who have achieved union with Him, removes the final veil from the face of the Beloved.⁶

The extraordinary devotion of our Ajmeeri hosts Kartar Chand, his wife, daughter and sons is evident in every detail. Kartar, a

prosperous sugar merchant, is a shaven Hindu though his sons have been brought up as Sikhs. The example that this harmonious family sets has inspired hundreds of all faiths to traverse the path. Our words, if not backed up by practice, have no power. Kirpal is fond of quoting, 'An ounce of practice is worth tons of theories.' He said that even if one is initiated into the highest path but doesn't practice, what good is it? In that case it is like having an effective medicine for the disease, but if that medicine remains locked in a cupboard, how can the patient expect a cure? About those who behave badly, he asks, 'If a dog bites someone, who gets blamed—the dog or the Master of the dog?' Unfortunately, it is the latter.

The day before leaving for Jaipur, our next stop, Master asks me in jest, 'Would you like to return to Delhi by elephant? You'd like? Just say, and I will arrange!'

The next morning I find myself astride a great tusked beast, with dark, gentle eyes. As brother elephant lumbers ponderously up an incline to the gateway of the Jaipur fortress, a strolling musician serenades us with his violin-like *sarangi*. When the ride is over, we find shade under a cluster of *peepul* trees. In their branches, we are entertained by a family of wild acrobatic monkeys, who win our applause and payment in bananas.

From the graceful pink sandstone redoubt on the promontory above, a handful of brave Rajput warriors held back Emperor Aurangzeb's hordes, bent on subjugating all of India. After a valiant struggle, the Rajputs were no match for the huge armies and perished to the last. The Rajput women committed suicide rather than surrender and be violated. These beautiful fortresses whisper a rich and tragic past of patriots, martyrs, and heroes.

It is the Saints, the Masters, who have sustained and nourished India's soul throughout the chaotic millennia. Their wisdom and message of individual salvation has spread to all countries of the world. I know that spirituality is not bound to any physical locale, but whenever I see a map of the Indian sub-continent protruding from the great landmass above it, down into the Indian Ocean, I cannot help but ruminate on her vaguely heart-like shape. Does our planet of elements have a heart? If fortunate enough to become attuned to the Infinite, one may feel its pulse everywhere, yet here in India, perhaps more than anywhere. She may be overcrowded and burdened with great difficulties, but *India's spirituality endures. It permeates the dust, the centuries-old dust trodden by the Saints and lovers of the One.*

1. Darshan Singh, *Streams of Nectar*, Wiley Eastern Ltd, New Delhi 110 002, 1993, p. 145.

2. *Women Saints of East and West*, (London: Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, 1972), p. 56.

3. Kirpal Singh was born into a Khatri Sikh family. Although he became a universal man, Kirpal Singh continued to respect and observe the outer aspects of his traditional faith. During his period of search, he studied and mastered many forms of yoga. In the biography *Pita Poot*, author H.C. Chaddha chronicles in Hindi hitherto unknown incidents, spiritual practices and experiences from Kirpal Singh's extraordinary early life prior to his first contact with his Satguru. In one such example, Kirpal, in his tireless attempts to realize God, spent many winter nights from dusk to dawn meditating while standing in a frigid pond, water up to his neck. Mr. Chaddha related to me, 'Maharaj, that was a very great *tapas* [austerity] you performed.' Master replied, 'That was no austerity; it was the only way one could withstand the inner fire of kundalini.' Kirpal Singh was also a firm believer in regular exercise, fresh air, pure diet, and continence to restore and maintain good health. Even into his sixties, he could perform the most difficult of yoga exercises. He wrote, 'The curative power is already within the body; doctors merely help to clear the way....'

4. Kirpal Singh, *The Crown of Life: A Study in Yoga* (Delhi, India: Ruhani Satsang, 1970), pp.144-147.

5. John A. Subhan, *Sufism, Its Saints and Shrines* (Lucknow Publishing House, 1960).

6. Shaykh Chisti's successor was Qutub-uddin (1186-1237), whose successor in turn was the famed Baba Farid (1173-1266), known as Shakar Gunj, or 'Storehouse of Sugar.' When just a young boy, Farid would sit for daily prayers with his devout mother. She would hide a piece of candy under her son's prayer mat, and after prayers were completed, he would reach for the candy Allah always gave him. One day his mother forgot to put the candy there. Realizing her forgetfulness, she became afraid that her son might lose his faith in Allah when he discovered her simple ruse. But Farid's heart was so pure, and God was so in love with him, the treats miraculously appeared. Thus his saintly reputation spread.