

Mirabai in the *Pothi Prem Ambodh*

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While the *Pothi Prem Ambodh* does not find a place in the *Dasam Granth*, there can be little doubt that it was composed for performance at the court of Guru Gobind Singh in Anandpur (1693). As such, it raises intriguing questions about relationships between Sikh understandings of the lives of the saints (*bhaktas*, *bhagats*) of North India and tales of the same persons that bear different sectarian and linguistic associations. The *Prem Ambodh*'s version of the life of Mirabai is particularly provocative in this regard because it is the oldest substantial narrative of her life to have yet been discovered. It is here translated into English for the first time.

The *Pothi Prem Ambodh* is one of the most intriguing documents to emerge from the courtly ambiance of Guru Gobind Singh—and one of the least well understood. When one considers its position in relation to other documents associated with the Anandpur court, on the one hand, and its association with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century hagiographical works that were produced well beyond the Sikh environment, on the other, it becomes obvious that the time has come for a detailed study of the *Prem Ambodh*. We hope the translation that follows, with its spare annotations, will provide a hint of the importance of such a project.

By singling out for translation the introduction (*parac*) to Mirabai that the *Prem Ambodh* provides—one of sixteen such *paracs*—we are able to suggest both the connections that tie the *Prem Ambodh* to its hagiographical cousins and the disparities that mark it out as being distinct from others in the group. The portrait of Mirabai that emerges in the *Prem Ambodh* is far from being "standard issue." As such, it deserves to come to the attention of all who treasure memories of Mira and study their transmission, especially because it is, in fact, the earliest fully articulated account of her life to which we can assign a definite date (1693). The much better known version provided by Priyadas in his *Bhaktirasabodhin* commentary on the *Bhaktam*¹ of Nabhadas was written two decades later (1712). Elsewhere, using the idea of circulation as a guide, we

take up the question of how one is to think about the relationships between these two Mirabai narratives—and others, as well. Interested readers are referred to our essay entitled "Mirabai at the Court of Guru Gobind Singh."¹ Here, by contrast, we restrict ourselves to the more limited task of translation itself.

We are fortunate in having several extant manuscripts of the *Poth» Prem Ambodh*, many containing the subtitle *Parac»¹ Prem Bhagat¹ K»¹*, that is, "Introductions to Exemplars of Love."² The oldest of these was copied in 1706 C.E and written, as they all are, in Gurmukhi script.³ As for the original text, the one being copied in these surviving manuscripts, the author explains in concluding that he finished the *Prem Ambodh* in *vikram samvat* 1750 (1693 C.E.)—to be precise, on the eleventh day of the waxing fortnight of the month of *maghar* or *m¹rga¶»r-a* (*sa÷batu satara sai pañc¹sa / sukala ik¹das» magasara m¹sa*, 17.61). He does so within the poetic diction of the text itself. He attributes to the True Guru (*Satigur*) the fact that he, as but a servant, has been able to complete the book (*poth» pØra^a satigura kar» / d¹sa du¹rai pØr» par», 17.61*). Similarly, he offers an invocation to *Ik O¶kar Satigur Pars¹di* ("One God, [who is known] by the grace of the Guru") at the very beginning of the manuscript. Clearly he is working in—or at least for—a Sikh environment.

Certain manuscripts offer additional information as well, giving *p¹ti¶¹h» 10*, the title of Guru Gobind Singh, as a preface to the text. But the best evidence is internal. All the oldest manuscripts, in copying the original text, include the colophon that comes at its conclusion, where the poet of the *Prem Ambodh* himself specifies 1693 as the date of its completion. All this strongly suggests that the *Prem Ambodh* was created for performance at the Sikh court at Anandpur. Accordingly, the Satigur being invoked at the beginning and conclusion of the text must be none other than Guru Gobind Singh.⁴ Evidently the text enjoyed considerable prestige among Sikhs in the two centuries that followed, since it was copied with relative frequency right through the nineteenth century. In individual manuscripts it appeared alongside compositions that form part of the *GurØ Granth*, commentaries on various authoritative Sikh texts, and the writings of Bhai Gurdas.⁵

The *Prem Ambodh* does not reveal the identity of its author. Various scholars have hazarded guesses, but on the basis of entirely unconvincing evidence.⁶ Davinder Singh Osahan is quite right to dismiss any notion that Guru Gobind Singh himself could have been the author of the text. Such an idea may have arisen from the passage to which we have already alluded, in which the author acknowledges his debt to the Satigur. Yet that formula is used to pay

tribute to the Guru's inspiration, not actually to claim his authorship, and would have been understood as such at the time.

The author of the *Prem Ambodh* was a decent literary craftsman—a good raconteur, as each of his sixteen "introductions" would require, yet also someone who was conscious of fashioning a unified text. He refers to the contents of the *Pothi Prem Ambodh* as forming "half a thousand" *caupa*s plus an additional sixteen *dohr*'s (*dohr*'s), *sora-h*'s, and *jhØlan*'s. The actual contents of the volume make it clear that in numbering these 500 *caupa*s he includes an equal number of *dohr*'s, so one emerges with a total stanza/couplet count of 1016. These poems are, he says, like leaves and flowers on a tree (*jiva p¹ta phØla taravara m¹hi*, 17.61). He goes on to say by way of a *phala*¶*ruti*, just before concluding, that to read or hear the *Prem Ambodh* is to experience happiness and repose (*parahata sunata lahai sukha bisr¹ma*, 17.61). He offers a similar sentiment earlier as well, stating that to read or hear the text is to find one's way to God (*t¹ kau pari suni p¹vahi keval param¹nanda*, 1.16).

Considering his estimate of the role love plays in the ultimate economy of things, the benefits he claims for a reading of the *Prem Ambodh* may come as no surprise. Using a formula often associated with the voice of Kabir, for instance, he tells us in his prologue that love's "untellable story" (*akatha kath¹*, 1.5, cf. *akaha kah¹n*», 1.12) is actually the subject of all the Vedas and Puranas. Without love, he says, there is no access to God (*bin¹ prema bhagav¹nu na mile*, 1.5). Love is the third member of a triad he sets out in his very first *caupa*—the Beloved, the Lover, and Love (*pr»tam prem» prem*, 1.1-2)—and our author makes it clear that he regards the generation of this triad as the fundamental form of energy that animates the world. To speak the language of the system itself, "once love arises, one can find the beloved" (*upajai prema taba pr»tama p¹vai*, 1.1). There may be some primal medium that makes it possible for divine truth to stand apart from all else (*prathamai aika;k¹ru akel¹*, 1.1), but once it generates light, displaying the world as we know it, the time of love has arrived (*k»o prak¹¶a prema k» vel¹*, 1.1).

Indeed, love is the very form of this divine act of self-illumination (*prema rØpa o;k¹ra prak¹s¹*, 1.8). When the primal Person (*purakh*) takes the form of experienceable being (*prakÅti*), its various aspects are held together by "thread of love" (*purakha prakriti rØpa dhari aiu / bh»tara sØtra prema k¹ p¹io*, 1.1). Thus the whole universe is pervaded by God (*param¹tam¹*), with phenomenal reality acting as the waves (*tarang*) that give shape to and evidence of the ocean of which they are an expression. The play of those waves—lover, beloved and love—is the overarching subject of *The Ocean of Love*,

that is, the *Prem Ambodh*. Blessed be the realm where the currency is love, and blessed be its inhabitants (1.6).

The poet of the *Prem Ambodh* describes this field of force in general terms in the first chapter of his text, the part called *parac*»¹*di* ("the initial introduction") in some manuscripts and *parac*»*prem k*» ("the introduction to love") in others. Having done so, he proceeds to give us sixteen case studies that describe how love functions in detail. These studies focus first on eleven historical figures, then on five that are familiar from Puranic lore, although our author does not mark a clear boundary between the two groups. The numbers of *caupa*»s and *doh*¹s he devotes to each *bhakta* are as follows: Kabir (12 stanzas), Dhanna (19), Trilogan (13), Namdev (39), Jaidev (19), Ravidas (29), Mirabai (33), Karmabai (25), Pipa (60), Sain (21), Sadhana (36), Balmik (i.e., Valmiki, 23), Sukhdev (35), Badhak (19), Dhruhi (i.e., Dhruva, 36), and Prahlad (61).⁷ He shows how the feeling of love rises in the hearts of each of these exemplary persons and goes on to portray the dramatic effects it has on their lives and on the lives of their families—the conundrums, the messes, and the eventual successes that make these saints the object of praise and affection on the part of those who surround them.

The saints described in the *Poth*» *Prem Ambodh* begin to appear in Sikh sacred writings during the rule of Guru Amardas (1552-1571), the third Guru,⁸ and poetry attributed to nine of the eleven historical saints mentioned in the *Prem Ambodh* appears in the *GurØ Granth* itself. Without question these *bhaktas* would have been figures well known to Sikhs associated with Guru Gobind Singh, whether from canonical sources or otherwise. One of the songs attributed to Mirabai appears in several seventeenth-century manuscripts of the *GurØ Granth*,⁹ but the way in which the author of the *Prem Ambodh* frames his tale strongly suggests that he expected his listeners to be familiar with her not just because of this one poem or others that were not accepted into the Sikh canon, but on the basis of other versions of her life story that circulated at the time. Not to be informed in this way would have been to miss the force of crucial elements in the *Prem Ambodh*'s account, some of them quite humorous indeed.¹⁰ If such stories did not bear distinctly Sikh markings, one must nonetheless remember that court poetry produced at Anandpur was not entirely preoccupied with divine avatars laboring to eradicate evil from the earth, a genre that established the context for Guru Gobind Singh's conflict with the Rajput chiefs in the Punjab Hills and the Mughals on the plains. The theme of love and genres appropriate to it also played a considerable role in this courtly literature.¹¹ A dramatic example is provided by the fact that a major treatise written in just that period to articulate

proper codes of Sikh of conduct was entitled *Prem Sum¹rag*, "The Good Path of Love."¹²

Certain aspects of the language of the *Pothi Prem Ambodh* strongly suggest that it was composed by someone deeply familiar with Punjabi idioms.¹³ It is also worth considering whether the *Prem Ambodh*'s strong interest in family relationships might owe something to a distinctive Punjabi mentality. Its account of Kabir, for instance, talks not only about the saint's wife, son, and daughter but also about his daughter-in-law and son-in-law (*ik beti ik bahu rahai*, 2.1; *dh» java» bahu pøtu batai¹*, 2.3). Similarly the narrative profile of Mirabai's natal family that is given in the *Prem Ambodh* far exceeds what we would expect if we knew her life story only as it is commonly told today.

The *Prem Ambodh* seems to have circulated strictly among a Punjabi readership—all the manuscripts we have are written in Gurmukhi script—yet it is plain that it also participated in a wider world of textual and oral circulation. The overarching designation *parac*», for example, recalls the term Anantadas used to framed this genre of life history a century earlier in eastern Rajasthan. Clearly a detailed study of relationships between the "introductions" provided in the *Prem Ambodh* and those that emerge in the works not only of Anantadas but also of Nabhadas, Jagga, and others is an important task for the years ahead.¹⁴ These relationships seem compelling. Yet as far as Mirabai is concerned—a saint with famous and strongly marked characteristics—the reader is also invited to see how strikingly unusual she seems in certain aspects of the *Prem Ambodh*'s account. As the following pages will show, this is a Mirabai for whom the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic-book version of her tale has little prepared us!

Parac» M»r¹b¹» k»

Listen to the story of Mirabai,
 who took love into her life and gained wisdom in her voice.
 Through love she enacted her feeling of love for God:¹⁵
 her mind thought of nothing but serving Hari.
 Then she became a companion of Ravidas,
 developing a love for his lotus feet.
 She married a man called Giridhar—"Mountain-Lifter"—
 who was born into the world as a royal prince, a Rajput,
 But that Giridhar never spoke the name of Ram,
 so she took him for a beast and refused to bed with him.¹⁶

*Ch. 1*¹⁷

Among the bodies one can take in being born,
 only one is best—the human,
 For humans, in their mental states and words and acts,
 can always, always utter Hari's name.¹⁸

Do. 1

So the real Giridhar became that Giridhar:
 As she became Mirabai, he became him.
 Mirabai became the icon of love;
 Giridhar, the likeness of the Beloved.
 Mirabai, in every shade of love she felt,
 involved her every part with Giridhar, her Beloved.
 Mirabai should be called the Lover
 and Giridhar, known as her Beloved.
 Mirabai aimed her love of God toward her beloved
 though her beloved Giridhar didn't show her all he was.¹⁹

Ch. 2

Mirabai felt love in every aspect of herself;
 Giridhar was the form of her beloved.
 That woman could not entirely comprehend
 the wondrous, peerless tale in which she lived.

Do. 2

That Giridhar was Giridhar, God Himself,
 remaining somewhat distant from the human form he took.
 The fire of knowledge burned inside his mind
 but outside you couldn't see the smoke.
 Inside he fully recognized himself;
 outside no one knew.
 Inside he was utterly, completely the Beloved;
 outside he just looked enchanted.

Inside the light of the three worlds shone;

outside he seemed like any ordinary being.

Ch. 3

Inside—wholly Brahma, nothing else,
but it manifests itself as the whole world.

Outside—the way it all appears on the surface:
why would anyone trust in that?

Do. 3

Inside everything is known for what it is.
Outside everything devolves to "I" and "mine."
Inside nothing like "this" or "that" pertains.
Outside they're established: I and you, this and that.
Inside—unmade, unborn, indestructible.
Outside it all looks like this or that activity.
Inside the parts cohere—a single peerless whole.
Outside, illusion and delusion everywhere.
Inside—an enormous ocean of knowledge.
Outside, the waves keep us from going there.

Ch. 4

Just as every body, every heart, hides away
the Highest Teacher, Highest Self, Ancient Person,
So, by that same token, no one can discern
the true Giridhar in his Giridhar frame.²⁰

Do. 4

Mirabai's love for God was love without a shore—
the edge of a double-edged sword.
In her beloved she couldn't see a love for God,
so how could she ever want to bed with him?
Thus she felt great restlessness of mind
as she wondered when he'd plant the seed of Ram
in his mouth:
"As soon as I hear him say the Name of Ram," she thought,
"I'll offer my everything to him.
If only he'd join the company of the good!
That's where the Name of Ram is heard."²¹

Ch. 5

Hearing the name of Ram
and a tongue that would intone it—
Mirabai poured all her wealth
into that moment.

Do. 5

Then she addressed this petition to Hari:
"My body is shaking with sobs.
What did I do wrong? What sin did you see in me
that you bound my life to such a fool?

How could such a man be thought clever and discerning?
 Anyone who doesn't love Vishnu is a fool."
 Then she beat her brow and pondered her karma:
 "Where was your fault in this, Hari Murari?
 No, it was mine—and not the fruit of this life only!
 Why couldn't my mother have been barren?"

Ch. 6

It must be my karma ripening to fruition—
 that's why I've been saddled with a union such as this.
 Because I lack good karma, Hari has assigned me
 to a state that's neither union nor true separation.²²

Do. 6

She spent plenty of time feeling like this
 but sentiments of love for God never crossed his lips.
 Mirabai refused to have sex with her useless groom
 and he did nothing that would mollify his bride.
 She burned with longing to be with her man—
 no one ever suffered an agony like that:
 All night long that woman stayed awake
 hoping she'd hear him say Hari's name as he dreamed.
 By day it was the normal round of cooking and servants—
 and the thought that she still might hear him speak
 in such a way.

Ch. 7

As her husband slept, the woman stayed awake
 tilting her ear toward his mouth
 Thinking, "Maybe my dear one will babble
 the name of Ram as he dreams."²³

Do. 7

Then by good fortune one auspicious night
 Giridhar, dreaming, spoke the name of Ram.
 His wife, like a bud, blossomed into flower
 and instantly the fragrance of love spread its scent.
 Her bosom heaved in her satin bodice
 as if the young woman had suddenly come to life.
 The suffering that comes from great separation—
 on hearing the name of Hari, it all turned to joy.
 She kissed her hands and touched them to her ears
 as she looked intently into her dear one's face,
 never lowering her head toward the ground.²⁴

Ch. 8

Again and again she circled him,
 gazing into his face:
 She wanted to kiss him, overcome with love,

but modesty restrained her.

Do. 8

When morning came, she sounded the drum,
 calling Brahmins and ascetics as guests.
 Armlets, anklets, jewels, and garlands—
 she waved them as offerings around her husband's head,
 Then gave away all these adornments as gifts,
 retaining only the skirt and shawl she wore.
 After she'd bestowed everything she owned on others
 her husband uttered the following words:
 "If you feel this great excitement, my beloved,
 it's a blessing to your house."

Ch. 9

Thus the woman responded to her husband:
 "My Lord and the basis of my life,
 I heard it emerge from your mouth at night—
 'Hari Hari,' that matchless sound."

Do. 9

When the woman spoke these words
 Giridhar answered, amazed:
 "The name of Ram has now come forth from my mouth!
 Inside I'm gone—but outside, here's this woman!"²⁵
 He closed his eyes, exercised his skill,
 and made his breath ascend to the tenth door.²⁶
 I myself have never had that experience
 so how could possibly describe it to you?
 As for the woman, when she recognized his feat—
 that her husband had relinquished his life—
 what could she do, the poor thing?

Ch. 10

Once the breath of life had left her husband
 and the body left behind was just an empty vessel,
 All she could do in her heart was lament
 that they'd never have the chance to meet again.

Do. 10

"Stupid me! I didn't know who my husband was!
 This love of mine was really God!
 Every being is imprinted with Self
 and Giridhar is the one who's caused it to be so.

To hell with the life I'm living in this world!
 I'm sick of it. I want no more.²⁷
 He never let on he had these abilities
 and now he's left his body—how can he help me now?

Even if Hari kills me and revives me a million times
in life after life, I'll never have a man like this.

Ch.11

It was great good fortune that I managed to find
a beloved, a dear one, such as he.
Fate it was that wrote it on my forehead
and now that the karma's spent, I grieve.

Do. 11

When Giridhar performed this act,
Mirabai began murmuring "Hari Hari."
She went to her house, closed her door,
and spoke not a word to anyone.
Her entire family, men and women both,
performed the death rituals for Giridhar's body.
However much they explained to that woman
about karma and dharma and family and such things,
She refused to open the door and talk with them.
She was so unsettled she couldn't speak.²⁸

Ch. 12

Heart, mind, intellect—she was utterly distressed.
She pressed her eyelids closed.
Like an image of God made from a block of wood
she had no sense of body or home.

So. 12

The whole family and the servants, male and female,
gathered again that very morning
And tried again to speak to Mirabai—
convince her in many ways to get hold of herself:
"The kind of behavior the world expects of a woman
at a time like this is to wail and beat her breast,
And if she's called a sati, a virtuous woman,
she has herself burned alongside her husband.
But that's not at all the way you're behaving.
It's beyond us, whatever your anguish is."

Ch. 13

When a person unites with the one she loves—
when the two become as one—

Only if some consciousness of the body remains
can she possibly explain what's been done.

Do. 13

A great ocean of love was contained in her body
and then many waves began to billow up inside,

Yet now, as she looked upon the life her husband had lived,
 she froze, as if the ocean had turned to ice.
 All of her sensory faculties went numb.
 She lost all awareness in her body.
 Her consciousness was like the dark at the heart of a flame:
 no insight, no intellect remained.
 Brothers and family, maidservants and manservants—
 how they lamented then!

Ch. 14

There she sat in a single yogic pose
 unwavering, unmoving, fixed,
 Like an image that someone had drawn on paper—
 extremely lovely to behold.

Do. 14

Half the night she passed in this way
 until the Friend of the World became concerned:
 Feeling compassion, he went to her door
 and stood there, that Nondual Highest Person.²⁹
 At that point Hari pronounced these words:
 "Mirabai, open the door.
 The sight that sages have never been able to see—
 I'll joyfully show it to you now."
 When the sense of what Hari was saying dawned,
 her mind stirred awake from its unconscious state.

Ch. 15

The words Hari spoke were like a brilliant sun
 as they dawned upon that woman.
 She felt its rays and they melted her,
 causing a current of love to flow.³⁰

So. 15

Love sprang up—she could scarcely contain it—
 but a pang also arose in the heart of that young woman.
 In anger she spoke the following words to Hari:
 "You've duped me! You've cast a spell!
 It was you who disguised yourself as Giridhar:
 It was you who hid yourself from me.
 A lord who really grasps the meaning of being lord
 would never withhold himself from a servant in this way.
 If a mother is prepared to poison her daughter,
 where is that daughter supposed to live?

Ch. 16

You dealt with me deceitfully—
 you stole away my vital breath, my life—
 And now you want to take the heart you've cut open

and pour some salt in the wound!

Do. 16

If this time, Hari, it's kindness that's made you come,
 then seeing a heart that suffers, make your mercy known.
 Just as my husband once departed with the wind—
 retrace that path. Take on his body again:
 The very form you took and put to such bad use—
 take it on again in a better, brighter way.
 If it's mercy you want to show this time around,
 then do so and I will be your servant."
 Master, if you'll take on the body of Giridhar,
 I'll open the door and set my eyes on you.³¹

Ch. 17

Friend of the poor, protector of orphans,
 perfect in every way—
 Because they love him, Hari's subjects dance
 in just the way he makes them dance.³²

Do. 17

Then Hari took on the form of Giridhar.
 "Open the door!" he said.
 Overjoyed, she opened, and catching sight of him,
 she bowed her head to his feet.
 With love, Hari bent and raised her up.
 He embraced her and extinguished her desire.
 The grief and pain that afflicted Mirabai—
 that Ancient Person took it away.
 He stole away her ego, her consciousness of self,
 and showed himself as Self of All Three Worlds.

Ch. 18

Every person who is subject to the senses
 burns with life's three fevers,³³
 But only a few of them drink the cup of love,
 tasting the joy of deathless nectar.

Do. 18

Their love-play lasted fully until morning,
 as if two wicks burned in a single cruse.

There they were fanned by the winds of love—
 two flames in a single place.
 One and two—that's just a way to tell a story.
 Really essence and non-essence were wiped away.
 The current of love flowed in both directions:
 through love the many became one.
 The mood of being master or servant dissolved.

On both sides ego melted away.³⁴

Ch. 19

The wondrous play of love—
 who can possibly describe it?
 Oneness, twoness, manyness, allness—
 none of these rubrics is equal to the task.

Do. 19

In the morning Hari vanished, he disappeared,
 but no wish of Mirabai remained unfulfilled.
 She started composing poems to Vishnu
 as *kirtan*, steeped in love day and night.
 She brought to light the Self that exists in every body,
 acting as priest to all four castes with her praises.³⁵
 Night and day she was dyed in emotion,
 drunk in her beloved, having drunk the cup of love.
 She lost the sense of any difference between them
 and saw that only One pervades the whole world.

Ch. 20

Just as a pond isn't only the water it holds,
 just as a tree isn't only the fruits and flowers,
 So is a human body less without love,
 though human beings love to forget.

Do. 20

When Mirabai became such a priest
 she swept aside all family modesty.
 Mother and father, family, relatives, brothers—
 seeing this immodesty, their rage increased.
 They tried to stop her, but she wouldn't desist.
 They knew she was their daughter, but couldn't
 say a thing.³⁶
 Then one day along came a renunciant ascetic—
 or so it seemed. Really, he was a rascal.
 He had taken both vows—inner and outer,
 bodily and mental—but at heart he was a fraud.

Ch. 21

Cursed be the life of anyone in this world
 who's a fraud when it comes to loving God:
 The doubletalk mirror he's constantly holding up—
 in the end it's ashes in his mouth.

Do. 21

Outside, praying, renouncing, abstaining;
 inside, utterly uncouth, devoid of love.
 Outside, he looks like a swami or mahant;

inside, ignorant, drunk.
 Outside, a pundit, a very knowledgeable person;
 inside, assaulted by terrible cravings.
 Outside, a performer of *katha* and *kirtan*;
 inside, burning in the fire of lust.
 Outside, a dhoti, a forehead-mark, a garland—
 utterly radiant. Meanwhile, inside, black!

Ch. 22

Outside, praying, renouncing, praising God;
 inside, worthless desire.
 How can the gold be so removed
 from the iron that lies inside?³⁷

Do. 22

That renunciant ascetic approached Mirabai
 and praised her as a priest would, in many different ways.
 Then seeing they were alone, he ventured this appeal:
 "My heart is burning with the fire of lust:
 For the love of Vishnu, put out the fire.
 Cool whatever it is that's incinerating me!
 Be merciful. Be reverent to me. Say yes:
 Shape those deathless life-giving words on your tongue!
 And if this makes you angry—if you think it's vile—
 I'll kill myself before your very eyes."

Ch. 23

Mirabai gave the matter some thought,
 turning it over in her mind:
 "A person who burns in the body's fire
 is sure to lose his way."

Do. 23

"This body is dirt," she thought. "Nothing pure about it.
 It's tuneless, truthless, a wandering ghost,
 But if an ascetic asks something in the name of Vishnu,
 then holding back is blocking the path of dharma."³⁸
 Thus Mirabai came forth with these words:
 "Hari will fulfill what you desire.
 Whatever wish has come into your mind,
 the Lord himself will bring it to pass.
 Happiness and sorrow are not ours to judge,
 so follow through on your hopes, Gosain."³⁹

Ch. 24

When the hypocrite rose from where he was,
 filled in mind and body with lust,
 At the first step he took, he fell to the ground—
 felled by Hari's justice.

Do. 24

His body burst. He decomposed like a leper.
 His youthful exploits had melted down his frame.
 So gave a toothy grin and made this petition:
 "Mother, what a stupid fool I was!
 Forgiving by nature, you care for the fallen,
 so gaze at me now with compassion!
 You raise up the fallen and make them known as saints.
 However they down in baseness, you bring them ashore:
 Out of great compassion now manifest your mercy,
 raising the fallen, magnifying the saints."⁴⁰

Ch. 25

Those who do good to those who do good to them—
 well, that's the way of the world.
 But those who do good to those who do bad—
 in our sort of world, they are rare.

Do. 25

The moment her merciful glance touched his frame
 he was healed of his ignorance and disease.
 His body seemed as if it were fashioned of gold
 as knowledge tantamount to N¹rada's arose:
 His whole person glowed with that knowledge of the real
 and he no longer cared whether he lived or died.
 Like the moon he spread abroad his brilliance to the world,
 vanquishing night's darkness with his light.⁴¹
 How could one ever conceal such a thing
 when the three worlds echo its glory?

Ch. 26

When the king heard all this, he began to quiver
 with an overwhelming anger.
 He started plotting out many ways
 he could manage to murder his daughter.⁴²

Do. 26

He ordered some Bhimasaini camphor to be brought
 and made it dissolve in sweetened water
 Into which one or two basil leaves had been crushed,
 then filled a golden cup with the liquid.
 In offering it, the king said it was consecrated food
 and Mirabai drank it with gusto.
 Drunk with love, she went on singing *kirtan*,
 so the king filled up another cup.
 Mirabai drank whatever she was given.
 Her mind was not the least thrown off course.

The king was astounded and slipped away.
 Seeing the miracle, he ran home.

Ch. 27

For a person of inner knowledge,
 what damage can poison do?
 If something falls into a salt mine
 it simply turns to salt.⁴³

So. 27

Everyone went to Mirabai's house.
 The sight of her made them all very happy.
 Anyone suffering from the three fevers of life
 was cooled in the act of seeing her.
 Whatever they wished was granted to them—
 whatever wish they had, it was fulfilled.
 Whether they were greedy, needy, or eager to learn—
 everyone went. No one stayed away.
 Thus she ministered to all four castes
 and the king found this unbearable.
 How could he allow it?

Ch. 28

The mind of the king was indeed enraged,
 so he took his sword in hand,
 Got up at midnight and made his way
 to Mirabai, to strike her down.

Do. 28

When the king arrived at Mirabai's house,
 he was plagued by yet another miracle:
 The soft sound of *kirtan* came from her house
 and there in the courtyard listening stood the Lord himself!
 Like a herd of deer immobilized, transfixed,
 every word Hari heard brought him joy:⁴⁴
 The arrow of love struck his heart
 and he stayed in the courtyard all night long.
 As bees are entranced with sweet aromas,
 so was he absorbed in sound.

Ch. 29

Just as bees, moths, birds, and deer
 feel total self-sacrificing love for those they love,
 Hari too observed that highest rule
 in every part of himself, at every time.⁴⁵

Do. 29

So the king caught sight of the Four-Armed One:
 one of his hands held the disc they call Fine Vision
 And his peacock-feather crown shone with such great brilliance

that it seemed to have robbed the moon and sun.
 The yellow clothes he wore dazzled as if lightning
 burst across a dark night, making it glow,
 And a garland of wildflowers adorned his breast,
 spreading its great fragrance throughout the house.
 Mirabai sang out her love for him
 and he produced sweet melodies with Murali, his flute.

Ch. 30

Seeing that sight for just a moment,
 the king filled with fear and he recoiled.
 He looked, but it made no sense to him:
 Who but a lover can see love?

So. 30

So he turned and went back home and started lamenting:
 "Here I've had a vision of the Lord,
 But however long I waited for my eyes to adjust,
 I couldn't seem to get the focus right."
 After many such laments he went and tried again,
 but again Fine Vision struck terror in him.
 Whenever he tried to cross the threshold, he could not:
 Fine Vision held him in its power.
 He'd turn back, gather up his confidence, and return,
 but tell me, who could ward off his fear?⁴⁶

Ch. 31

Thus the king lamented.
 He made his way home and sat down.
 He spent the whole night gripped by fear.
 He tried to sleep, but no sleep came.

Do. 31

When it was morning, he took along his wife,
 and went to Mirabai with this appeal:

"Mirabai, you are extraordinarily wise.
 Among those who love the Lord, you're the best.
 There is no distinction between you and Hari,
 no difference at all—a seamless whole.
 Daughter, whatever disrespect we have shown—
 be forgiving, a Man-Lion to your saints!
 Now we no longer regard you as our daughter.
 You're Hari's servant, and indeed, Hari himself.⁴⁷

Ch. 32

You're a forest of sandalwood; we're just a single tree.
 You're a touchstone; we are just the iron.
 You are the one who worships the Lord

and we—now we worship you.

Do. 32

Then Mirabai—wise and accomplished—
 approached her mother and father reverently
 And asked them, please, to let her send them home
 while she, drunk with love, sang Hari's glory.
 Then she trained on Hari her unbroken gaze,
 perceiving him as the Self who exists in every body.
 Drunk with love, her mind was immersed
 in the sight of the Highest Self, wherever she was.
 Who can find a metaphor for her?
 The true metaphor, only Hari knows.⁴⁸

Ch. 33

Hari and the true and good—they are one.
 There's no hint of difference between them—
 So fill your eyes with both of them.
 See them in your heart.⁴⁹

Do. 33

Notes

1. See Allison Busch and Thomas deBruijn, eds., *People in Motion, Ideas in Motion: Culture and Circulation in Pre-Modern South Asia* (Leiden: E. J. Brill), forthcoming.

2. Difficulties in translation immediately arise because of the converging domains of *bhakti* (and its past passive participle *bhakta*, i.e., *bhagat*) and *prem*. See note 15, below.

3. Numerous manuscripts of the text are scattered all over the Punjab. The text of the *Prem Ambodh* appears independently as well as along with other early Sikh writings. The early dated manuscripts that we were able to examine were prepared in 1706, 1740, 1743, 1783, and 1787. The 1787 manuscript is illuminated with the gold margins and is inscribed by a calligrapher of high caliber. For an excellent critical edition of the text, see Davinder Singh Osahan, ed., *Prem Ambodh* (Patiala: Punjab University Press, 1989).

4. Davinder Singh Osahan comes to the same conclusion, as distinct from the idea that Guru Gobind Singh was the author of the text (Osahan, ed., *Prem Ambodh*, p. 2).

5. For instance, the *Pothi Prem Ambodh* takes its place alongside compositions of Guru Arjan and Guru Gobind Singh in a manuscript dated 1740, appears with commentaries on Guru Nanak's *Japji* and *Siddh Ghosati* in a manuscript dated 1787, and accompanies compositions by Bhai Gurdas in manuscripts dated 1706 and 1783. It seems plain, thus, that scribes had no hesitation in anthologizing the *Prem Ambodh* along with writings that claimed canonical or semi-canonical status within the Sikh tradition.

6. Piara Singh Padam attributes the text to Harid¹s: *Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji de Darbari Ratan* (Patiala: Kalam Mandir, 1976), p. 179. Rattan Singh Jaggi names Kevald¹s as its author: *Sikh Panth Vishavakosh* (Patiala: Gur Ratan, 2005), vol. 2, p. 1191. The appearance of the names Harid¹s and Kevald¹s at isolated points in the text—without any claim about authorship—does not provide an adequate basis for making such a claim. Further, see our "Mirabai at the Court of Guru Gobind Singh."

7. The author of the *Prem Ambodh* himself provides this enumeration, listing the number of *caupa*s involved but no other verse forms (1.17-18). It is intriguing that his summary comes at this point in the text. It would appear either that he appended these two final *caupa*s, each with an associated *doh*¹, to the introductory *parac*, which he had already finished, or that he composed the entirety of the introductory *parac* after he had completed the remainder of the text. Either way, he makes it clear that he recognizes a clear difference between the first *parac*, the introductory one, and the narrative *parac*s that follow.

8. See Gurinder Singh Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 108.

9. Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, p. 115.

10. See Hawley and Mann, "Mirabai at the Court of Guru Gobind Singh."

11. See stanzas 9 in Ami Shah's translations of the *saviyye* in her "Liturgical Compositions of the *Dasam Granth*," in this issue.

12. For a discussion of this text, see the relevant section in Gurinder Singh Mann, "Sources for the Study of Life and Times of Guru Gobind Singh," in this issue.

13. Davinder Singh Osahan provides a convenient list in *Prem Ambodh*, p. 49.

14. Essential starting-points for such an effort are W. M. Callewaert in collaboration with Swapna Sharma, *The Hagiographies of Anantad¹s: The Bhakti Poets of North India* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000); Rupert Snell and Winand M. Callewaert, eds., *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994); Justin E. Abbott and Narhar R. Godbole, *Stories of Indian Saints: Translation of Mahipati's Marathi Bhaktajijaya* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982 [originally 1933-1934]); Heidi R. M. Pauwels, *In Praise of Holy Men: Hagiographic Poems by and about Harir¹m Vy¹s* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 2002); and William L. Smith, *Patterns in Indian Hagiography* (Guwahati: Srikrishna Prakashan, 2003 [originally Stockholm, 2000]).

15. Here the author introduces the two most critical terms in his exposition: *bhakti* and *prem*. We will make it a practice to translate *bhakti*, wherever it occurs, as "the love of God" unless a specific object of that love is named, as it is in *caupa*». 6.6: *bisana bhagata*, "the love of Vishnu." The term most frequently used to translate *bhakti* into English is "devotion," but this suggests a distinctly more private, staid form of piety than the *bhakti* usually conveys in Indic languages. We therefore render *prem* and its closely associated cousin *pr»ti* as simply "love." The word *prem* may also connote love in a religious mode, but it typically signals love in a broader range (as was also possible for *bhakti* in earlier centuries). The selfless or self-emptying associations of *prem* often distinguish it from lust or passion (*k¹m*), but such passion is often also understood to be an aspect of *prem*. *Prem* can refer to deep devotion as it pertains to two human lovers, but it is not Platonic love—love without the body. As is plain in the stanza at hand and at many other points in the *Prem Ambodh*, the author of the text believes that the realms of *bhakti* and *prem* are thoroughly overlapping.

16. As this passage sets the narrative frame for the life of Mirabai that we will hear, it is negotiating some complicated territory. In the original the term Giridhar is offered without the gloss that we provide in the translation: Mountain-Lifter. The audience would presumably have known the term well—that it refers in the first instance to Krishna—and would also have known the story of

Krishna's lifting Mount Govardhan, to which it refers. By the seventeenth century, however, Giridhar had become a word one could use to name any young man, and apparently that is how we meet it here. A somewhat parallel observation could be made about the term *r¹japutra*, which also occurs in this passage. In its proper etymological sense, *r¹japutra* refers to "the son of a king," and that is the first register that comes into our translation, appropriate to the *tatsama* form that we meet in the original. But *r¹japutra* is also *r¹jpøt*, the familiar term designating the rulers of the region that today is called Rajasthan. We must remember, furthermore, that Krishna himself—the original Giridhar—entered his earthly incarnation in a social location that might be called, from this seventeenth-century vantage point, "Rajput." Thus a great deal is packed into this single verse.

17. Three verse forms appear in the Mirabai *parac*»—*caup¹i*, *doh¹*, and *sora-h¹*. They are indicated by means of the following abbreviations: *ch.*, *do.*, and *so*. Please note that the designation of particular verses in the notes that follow (e.g., *ch.* 21.4) refer to their locations with the Mirabai *parac*», which would receive the number 7 if listed on the general roster of *parac*»s included in the *Prem Ambodh*.

18. The original has *hari hari n¹m*, a phrase that carries some of the repetitive force of the mantra itself. The word Hari is familiarly heard as implying a Vaishnava frame of reference, particularly when repeated, as here. But Sikhs also accept the name Hari—along with the name of Ram—as a general designation for the Divine. This "vulgate Vaishnava" frame is appropriate to the way in which the author of the *Prem Ambodh* understands Ravidas, whose religious practice it depicts as being centered on the ¶¹*lagram* stone, that least iconistic manner of representing Vishnu.

19. The situation depicted here seems to play on an understanding of Krishna that envisions him as someone capable of putting his lovers to the test. This mischievous, playful side of Krishna is prominently on display in the five most famous chapters of the *Bh¹gavata Pur^{1a}a* (10.29-33). In the second line of this stanza, however, there is a hint that Giridhar is not the only one here who bears both unmanifest/cosmic and manifest/worldly forms. When we hear that "Mirabai became the icon of love," we may surmise that she too has an eternal antetype. Such modes of thinking were familiar in

Vashnava thought of this period, as we see, for instance, in Harir¹y's seventeenth-century commentary on the *Caur¹s*» *Vai¹avan k*» *V¹rt¹*.

20. "Every body, every heart" is an attempt to convey the double force of *gha-gha-*. The word literally denotes a pot or water-jar, and is a frequent metaphor for an individual body or soul/heart, connoting both the container and the thing contained.

21. "Company of the good" translates the phrase *s¹dh sang*, and it seems clear that the terms are intended to have this broad meaning. In common parlance, however, the term *s¹dhu* can also have the more specific meaning of a renunciant, an ascetic, and stories of Mirabai being surrounded by *s¹dhus* often read as if this is the accepted meaning of the term. When a bona fide [sic!] ascetic walks on stage in this recounting of Mira's story, he is called a *vair¹g*». (*ch.* 21.4). On *s¹dh sang* and similar usages, see J. S. Hawley, *S¹or D¹s: Poet, Singer, Saint* (Seattle: University of Washington Press and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 141-144.

22. The operative terms are *sa÷joga* (union) and *vijoga* (separation). Apparently she means that she can neither enjoy the fruits of marital union (*sa÷joga*), given who her husband is, nor can she be free to live a life apart from him (*vijoga*)—a life of celibacy. The word *sa÷joga* also occurs earlier in the *doh¹*, where it means not only the sexual conjunction that occurs in marital union but also a particular configuration of events—the sort of thing that might be taken as happenstance under normal circumstances. We have tried to convey something of this double meaning in the phrase "saddled with a union."

23. At the beginning of this *doh¹* we encounter for the first time the word *p»a* (also, somewhat later, *p»u*, *ch.* 11.1), which has the double designation of a (male) beloved and a husband. The one register means that it connects with the vocabulary of *prem*; the other means that it fits with the social arrangements pertaining to Mirabai as a young bride.

24. This passage is not without its difficulties, especially since the Guru Nanak Dev University manuscript upon which Osahan's edition is based apparently lacks the negative particle *na* that appears in the 1740 and 1783 manuscripts and is reflected in our translation. If the writer's intent was in fact not to use the negative, then the sense would be:

She kissed her hands and touched them to her ears
as she looked intently into her dear one's face,
then lowered her head modestly toward the ground.

25. Apparently we should read not *b¹pa* but *b¹ma* (i.e., *v¹m*, "young woman"), as in several manuscripts; it preserves both rhyme and meaning. The verse is an important one—and humorous. The author apparently wants us to think that once Giridhar realizes he has uttered the name of *R¹m*, he is prepared to die. This is because, unbeknownst to him, he has spoken the *t¹raka mantra*, the last evocable a person should hear before crossing over to the other side of existence at death. At this point he fashions himself in the seated *sam¹dhi* pose that realized beings adopt as they prepare for their own deaths. On "Rama, *R¹ma*" as the *t¹raka mantra*, see Diana L. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), pp. 332-334.

26. The reference is to the opening at the top of the head which can be reached when a person's *kundalin* energy rises above the limitations imposed by the nine doors of the senses. Again, we are in the realm of *sam¹dhi* practice.

27. Literally, "I repent of it, not a little."

28. In verse 4 of this stanza, the original contains the term *b¹»,* which we have translated "that woman." It is also, however, clearly shorthand for Mirabai, and is translated as such in all subsequent instances. The shorter form *b¹»* actually becomes the writer's preference from here on out, with the full name Mirabai reasserting itself only as the story approaches its conclusion (*ch.* 27.3, *ch.* 32.2, and the second *doh¹* after *ch.* 33).

29. The translation reads *mai¹* (i.e., *m¹y¹*) as "compassion," but the term also has a long association with Vishnu as his magic, illusion-producing power in the world. We understand *adøe* ("nondual") on analogy with *døet¹* in *do.* 19.

30. This reads the improbable *m¹l¹* ("garland") as *bh¹l¹* ("fit," i.e., "dawned upon," to stick with the overarching metaphor), as in *sambh¹ln¹*. Note that we apparently have *sam¹l¹* (for *sambh¹ln¹*) in *ch.* 16.1, so perhaps it is not a scribal error but a dialectal feature.

31. The expression used in the original is *darasanu p¹*», "to have the sight" of someone. As is well known, it often carries strongly religious overtones.

32. The expression *n¹c nac¹na*, while it literally means "to cause someone to dance" and carries that meaning in this line, also conveys the sense of having someone under one's full control, as a puppeteer controls his marionettes. *An¹tha* ("orphans") could also be translated in its generic sense as "the protectionless."

33. The *t¹na t¹pa* are *krodha*, *moha*, and *lobha* (anger, delusion, and greed) in the standard listing, though *aha=k¹ra* (self-centeredness, egotism) can sometimes be substituted for *krodha*.

34. "Ego" translates the term *¹pu*. We have chosen this in preference to something like "the sense of self" because we reserve the term "self"—usually with a capital S—as a way to render *atam* i.e., *¹tman*), which occurs at various points in the text (recently, *ch.* 18.5; in a different context, *ch.* 20.3). "Melted away" translates the verb *hir¹i¹*, which is closely related to the noun *Hari* ("the remover"). It is frequent for authors of Vaishnava texts to play with the double meaning of *Hari*—a proper noun on the one hand, an action of stealing or removing on the other. It is possible for the word *hari* itself to occur as a verbal form.

35. The original is somewhat more parsimonious:

*sabha gha-a ¹tamu rØpu dikh¹vai / c¹ra barana kau puja
pØj¹vai.*

We have made the priestly dimension explicit in anticipation of the introduction of the term *puj¹r*» in *ch.* 21.1.

36. The meaning is not entirely clear. Is the suggestion that, knowing this daughter's special independence of mind, her family feared to say anything that would drive her to even more extreme behavior? Or is this mention of Mirabai's being a daughter (*dh¹u*) intended to draw attention in a simpler, more strictly structural way to the embarrassment in which her family members found themselves? In either case, it may be worth noting that the term that is here chosen for "daughter" contrasts with what we have elsewhere in the text (*putr*», *do.* 26, *ch.* 32.4-5).

37. Alternately one might see in this phrase a reference to the touchstone that is able to transform base metals—paradigmatically iron—into gold, but it is hard to make the syntax support such a reading:

Why does such a person shrink from turning gold
when he's such a mass of inner iron?

The matter of a golden appearance returns in *ch.* 26.2—but in another guise.

38. "Tuneless" is an effort to translate the word *nasura*, but that is not the only possibility. One might also understand it as "running sore," heading toward a Farsi register, but if so, strictly speaking, it should be *nasØra* or even better *n¹sØra*. Or we might again have *asura* ("demon"), as at the end of the *parac* on Ravidas, where the vocabulary is closely parallel; but if so one has the problem of rationalizing the *na* with which the word begins, a problem that is not so severe in the case of Ravidas *parac* *ch.* 29.3 (i.e., *Prem Ambodh* 6.29.3). The word *s¹dhaka* (*ch.* 24.2) is translated "ascetic," a common meaning that seems appropriate in this context. Yet the term also has a broader meaning—a religious practitioner, an adept, a spiritual seeker—and it may be that the author intends us to understand this larger frame of reference as applying to the rule Mirabai enunciates at this point.

39. The title Gusain is often used in relation to Krishna (above, in that context, it is translated "master"), but is also appropriate more broadly as a term of religious respect. Ironically, in this context, the word's literal meaning is "one who has mastered the senses."

40. The word "saint" translates *sant*, with which is not etymologically connected but whose general terrain it approximates. See Hawley, *SØr D¹s: Poet, Singer, Saint*, p. 142.

41. It is also possible to understand this line as referring to the light that Mirabai generates, as shown by the ascetic's transformation.

42. This is the point in the story when the *r¹n¹* so familiar in all versions of Mirabai's story makes his appearance. We translate the

term simply as "king," though this obscures its definite ring as pertaining to western Rajasthan, even specifically Mewar.

43. In common practice a stick of salt is sometimes applied to a wound if it is thought to contain poison. Here the salt's absorptive power is greatly magnified: we have a whole mine of it.

44. Here again we encounter the plasticity of the word *hari*, but this time the possibility for a double meaning comes from the overlap with the adjective *har* ("every"), not the verb *harn*¹ ("remove").

45. The phrase "total, self-sacrificing" is inserted to clarify the meaning. For members of the intended audience they would be unnecessary, since everyone would know that love causes a bee to stay too long in a lotus, risking death as the flower closes at night; a moth to fly too close to the flame; a *cakor* bird to die of thirst until it drinks rainwater that falls under the constellation *sv¹ti*; and deer to respond the "deer" raga even when it is a hunter who plays it.

46. Here we may have overtones of the well-known story of how Vishnu's sharp-edged disc called *sudar¹an cakra* ("Fine Vision") relentlessly pursued Durv¹s¹ when Vishnu came to the defense of his devotee Ambar¹, whom Durv¹s¹ had unjustly persecuted. In this instance, however, the chase is only imaginary—the figment of a guilty conscience—and rather than a just king (Ambar¹) we have a persecutor.

47. The title *narahar*», designating the Man-Lion avatar of Vishnu, calls to mind the episode of Prah¹d and his evil father Hira¹yaka¹ipu. We have interpreted the word *sant* ("saint") as referring primarily to Prah¹d, the devotee to whose rescue the Man-Lion came. There are other overtones as well, however. This whole story has a domestic location—a parent pitted against a child—and fear of the terrible power of the Man-Lion must be in the king's mind as he begs her to be "Man-Lion" in a very different sort of way. The king, identifying Mirabai entirely with Hari, thus appeals to her as the merciful side of Vishnu, hoping to fend off the revenge he might rightly expect from Vishnu's powerful aspect, as represented by his exemplary weapon of war, the *sudar¹an cakra*.

48. Or, "Only Hari knows the metaphor for the saints"—or "the good" (*s¹dh*). The thought is that God alone can know how to characterize those who train their consciousness on God. This is not unlike the

phrase r^1m *jaise* r^1m : " R^1m is the only simile for R^1m ." The word s^1dh recurs in the doh^1 that follows and is translated again as "the true." Again, however, "the saints" and "the good" are possible alternate translations. Finally, in old Punjabi the word *upam*¹ often loses its specific meaning as metaphor and simply connotes praise. If that is the author's intent, the verse would mean:

Who can find the proper praise for her?
 The praise of the saints is something only
 Hari can do.

49. Here is the lesson, familiar to the genre, of the ultimate identity between those who love God and the object of their love. In this concluding *doh*¹, where the benefits of listening to the foregoing account are implied, listeners are urged to focus their attention on both sides of the *bhakti* equation.
