

## HINDI DEVOTIONAL POETRY

**Overview** Hindi as a literary language is a comparatively late development in Indian history. While Tamil literary tradition begins around 100 CE, followed by Kannada (c. 700), Telugu (c. 900), Marathi (c. 1200), Hindi literature emerged only in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. One obvious reason for this later appearance is that literary expression in north India was dominated by the great weight of Sanskrit. Hindi, which evolved from Sanskrit as a spoken language, did not have the same cultural status as Sanskrit, which was the ancient language of the Vedas and of the courts of classical India. Starting around 1400 CE, however, Hindi received a huge boost from the devotional poetry movement, in which the mother tongue was used to sing in praise of the gods. Now, in a comparatively short space of 150 years (roughly 1450-1600), Hindi experienced a poetic flowering, producing poets and poems that are still sung and read today. One of the results was the Hindi version of the *Ramayana* by Tulsī Das, an epic poem regarded as the greatest single piece of Hindi literature ever.

This essay, however, focuses on the shorter works composed by three extraordinary poets: Kabir (later half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century), Surdas (first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century) and Mirabai (also first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century). These three poets wrote with an incandescent passion and literary skill that has secured them a place in world literature. And they are very different. Kabir was not a conventional devotional poet; he was a mystic, who did not believe in images and envisioned an absolute reality (harking back to the concept of *brahman* in the Upanishads). Surdas wrote his poetry in praise of Krishna, borrowing from Sanskrit works, such as the *Gita Govinda*, but he wrote in the Hindi dialect of Braj and was also equally renowned as a singer. The last member of this famous trio is Mirabai, from the far west of the country (Rajasthan), who also sang of Krishna but as a woman. All three poets, however different, continued the social reformist tendency of the bhakti movement, which had propelled it from the very beginning in south India.

**History** The period in which these Hindu poets emerged was the tail end of the Delhi Sultanate, when Sanskrit had declined as a court language and was being replaced by Persian and Indo-Persian literary traditions. In fact, the early shoots of Hindi literature first appeared in around 1300 in the Deccan (central India), where Muslim rulers established several important regional kingdoms. The language of these courts was called both Deccani and Hindavi, which were a mixture of Hindi grammar and syntax with vocabulary from Persian, Arabic and the local languages in the Deccan (Hindi, Marathi, Kannada and Telugu). Dialects were also important in the early development of Hindi literature, before a standard language and script were established. Among our trio of poets, for instance, Kabir relied on a vocabulary taken from two Hindi dialects (Awadhi and Braj), while Surdas wrote exclusively in Braj, which is still spoken and written today. Likewise, Mirabai wrote in a western dialect of Hindi, known as Rajasthani. The influence of Indo-Persian literature on these poets is most visible in the mystical songs of Kabir, which are virtually indistinguishable from the songs of the Sufi saints. In other words, this period of 150 years in which Hindi poetry emerged (1450-1600) was a time of cultural synthesis and merger. The last fifty years overlap with the reign of Akbar, the great Mughal Emperor, who promoted a new religion that combined Hindu and Islamic elements, and whose court poets included Muslims who worshipped both Allah and Krishna. Devotional Hindi poetry thus arose out of a confluence of devotionalism from the south and Indo-Persian influences from the north.

### Cultural Significance

The literary output of these three medieval poets is central to the development of Hindi as a literary language. Competing, on the one hand, with the sacred status of Sanskrit and, on the other hand, with the royal patronage of Persian, Hindi was struggling to assert itself in north India. However, these poets' works, buoyed by the energy of devotionalism and its championing of local languages, helped to assert a Hindu identity when most of India was under Muslim rule. The focus on Krishna in the poetry of both Surdas and Mirabai represents a continuation of a tradition that stretches back to the late *Upanishads*, through the Sanskrit texts of the *Bhagavad Gita* (c. 400 CE), *Bhagavata Purana* (c. 800-1000 CE), and the *Gita Govinda* (12<sup>th</sup> c. CE). Today, Mirabai's songs form part of classical singing traditions in both north and south India. Kabir, the third poet and odd man out, is not so musical and his poems remain mostly on the page, but not without considerable influence. Reflecting the radical vision of much earlier bhakti poems in south India, Kabir's poems present a trenchant

critique of conventional religion. By taking aim at the foolishness in both Hinduism and Islam, by calling for the worship of a god who transcends these social categories, his poems have often been invoked during times of communal strife in India. The appeal of Kabir across the religious divide is also evident in the fact that many of his verses were incorporated in the scriptures of Sikhism.

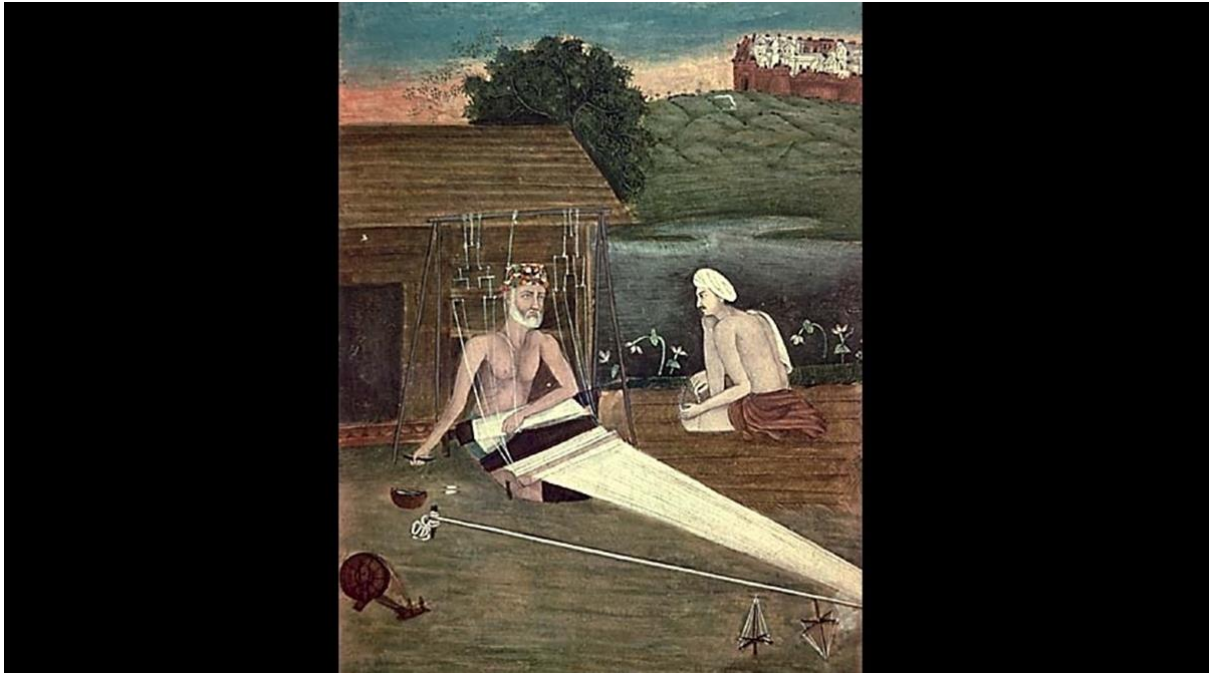
## Poets

**Kabir** The earliest of our three poets, Kabir, is a mystery in more ways than one. As with most medieval figures, we know next to nothing about his life, while his fame ensured that many legends and stories developed to fill that gap. His dates vary from early 15<sup>th</sup> century to early 16<sup>th</sup> century, with the consensus falling toward the later end of that spectrum. It is generally accepted that Kabir was either born in a Muslim family of weavers or brought up by them. The name 'Kabir' derives from an Arabic word ('great') used to describe god. From his poems, however, it appears that he did not absorb Islamic teachings and still retained, from somewhere in his background, a set of Hindu beliefs and practices. When a young man, Kabir was taught in the holy city of Benares by a Hindu scholar and Vishnu devotee named Ramananda. From this man, Kabir was taught the *advaita* or monism school of Hindu philosophy, in which the material world is seen as an illusion. It seems likely that Kabir did marry and raised one son and one daughter, probably in the vicinity of Benares.

His poems were transmitted by oral tradition for more than a century before being compiled and written down in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century in a volume called the *Kabir Bijak*. His poetry uses simple words, taken mostly from two Hindi dialects (Avadhi and Braj) spoken in and around Benares. The poems explore the pain and pleasure of devotion, the path to mystical union with god not as a named figure (like Krishna or Siva), but as an impersonal absolute. This type of devotional bhakti is known as *nir-guna* or 'no-form', as opposed to *sa-guna* or 'with form.' *Saguna* bhakti poetry is what most poets, including Surdas and Mirabai, wrote. Although Kabir is unconventional in this way, he is very much a traditional bhakti poet in that he continued the legacy of radical reform set in motion by his earlier south Indian counterparts. Writing at a time of Muslim rule across most of north India, Kabir was scathing in his attack on religious bigotry and sectarian ignorance. He criticised the Muslim practice of eating beef, but he also dismissed many mindless Hindu practices, too. It is possible to see him as a Sufi poet, and he did share many beliefs and practices with Sufism, but his language is primarily that of a Hindu monotheist. In the end, however, it is misleading to categorise a poet who himself exposed the folly of speaking with labels like 'Muslim' and 'Hindu.'

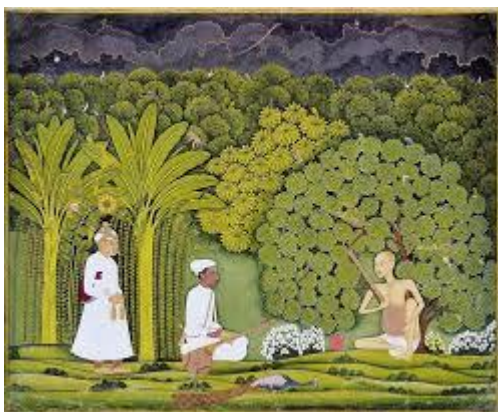


(statue of Kabir, late 20<sup>th</sup> century)



(painting of Kabir, as a weaver, date unknown)

Surdas Surdas is a more recognisable devotional poet, whose poetry resembles that of the early Tamil and Sanskrit writers who sang in praise of Krishna and Vishnu. Again, his dates are unclear, though most scholars agree that he lived in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Legend has it that Surdas (whose name means 'servant of music/tone') was blind at birth, and it does appear that he was blind for most of his life. The legendary story continues to claim that he left home, or was abandoned, at a young age and later met Vallabha Acharya. Vallabha was from the south, a Telugu man, who came to Benares in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and became an influential theologian by fashioning a new form of Vishnu worship ('Pure Non-dualism'). Sometime after his death, the poems of Surdas were collected in a single volume called the *Sursagar* ('Ocean of Sur'), although it is probable that some of the poems were actually written by others in imitation of Surdas. What is undeniable is that Surdas was deeply influenced by the story of love between Radha and Krishna, which had inspired writing all across north India by this time. His fame rests not only on his surviving poems but also on his reputation as a singer (hence his name). A blind poet and singer, who sang in the regional language of Braj, he is a unique figure in Hindi literary history.



(miniature painting of Surdas, on the right, Rajasthan, 17<sup>th</sup> c.?)

Mirabai Mirabai (also simply Mira or Meera) is probably the medieval Hindi poet whose songs are most often sung today. She was apparently born around 1550 in the far western desert region of Rajasthan. Little else can be said about her life with any certainty. Legends, written down about 1750, roughly 150 years after her death, claim that she was the wife of a Hindu raja named Rana who ruled the princely state of Mewar. However, and in a striking parallel with Mahadevi Akka (the female

poet of devotionalism in Kannada), she announced that she was already 'married' to the Dark Lord, or Krishna. Also like the Kannada poetess, Mirabai apparently outraged the local court by defying all conventions of female behaviour. One story has it that her father-in-law heard her speaking endearments to a male visitor behind locked doors. Bursting in, furious with rage and shame, the father-in-law found Mirabai composing her love poetry to Krishna. Another tale says that the father-in-law tried to poison her with a cup of holy water, but she survived. Although her poetry explores the pangs of love, often very erotic love, from the perspective of a woman, their universal message meant that her songs were sung, and are still sung, by both men and women.

Because of the popularity of her poems, thousands are attributed to her, though only about 300 hundred are accepted by scholars. As with Surdas, many poems said to be hers were probably written by her admirers. The oldest record of her poems is a short manuscript from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. More complete collections, including poems of questionable authorship, were written down only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although she sings of Krishna with a religiosity that closely resembles the poems of Surdas, Mirabai is today rejected by many purist scholars and followers of Vallabha Acharya's brand of Vishnu worship. Her erotic relation to god is not holy enough.



(painting of Mirabai singing to Krishna, early 20<sup>th</sup> c.)



(Vivek Das, leading a group of singers performing Kabir's poems, Benares, 2005)



(statue of Kabir and other devotional poets, Benares, 1980s)

## Poems and translations

### 1. Kabir poem, translated by Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh, 2000

Saints I've seen both ways.  
Hindus and Muslims don't want discipline, they want tasty food.  
The Hindu keeps the eleventh-day fast, eating chestnuts and milk.  
He curbs his grain but not his brain, and breaks his fast with meat.  
The Muslim prays daily, fasts once a year, and crows "God!, God!" like a cock.  
What heaven is reserved for people who kill chickens in the dark?  
Instead of kindness and compassion, they've cast out all desire.  
One kills with a chop, one lets the blood drop, in both houses burns the same fire.  
Muslims and Hindus have one way, the guru has made it clear.  
Don't say Ram, don't say Allah, so says Kabir.

This poem, perhaps the most often quoted of Kabir's, displays his scathing tone that is applied equally to Hindus and Muslims. The mockery and wit recall similar sarcasm deployed by Basavanna, the Kannada devotional poet of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Rather than proposing a new syncretic religion that combines the two faiths, as some scholars maintain, this poem appears to pour scorn on the idiocy of all ritual practices. Both groups are guilty of hypocrisy, and neither shows the compassion (especially toward animals) that Kabir commends. The message is that language and labels are a trap: 'Don't say Ram [Rama], don't say Allah.' It's simple, but it's compelling.

### 2. Kabir poem, translated by Charlotte Vaudeville

Reading book after book the whole world died,  
and none ever became learned!

This aphoristic poem again illustrates Kabir's disdain for conventional society and its practices, especially traditional types of learning. It is characteristically pithy, punchy and nearly inscrutable.

### 3. Kabir poem translated by Rabindranath Tagore

If God be within the mosque, then to whom does this world belong?  
If Ram [Rama] be within the image which you find upon your pilgrimage, then who is there to  
know what happens without?  
Hari [Krishna] is in the East, Allah is in the West.  
Look within your heart, for there you will find both Allah and Ram;  
All the men and women of the world are His living forms.  
Kabir is the child of Allah and of Ram: He is my Guru, He is my Pir [guide].

Despite its popular image, Hinduism has a strain of iconoclasm as illustrated here by Kabir and other devotional poets. Again, this demonstrates the strong element of cultural criticism within this movement, which often exposed the emptiness of ritual, the mislaid emphasis on external forms and the false sanctity of a temple or mosque.

### 4. Kabir poem translated by David Lorenzen,

We have searched Islam, these teachers throw many thunderbolts,  
Recklessly they display boundless pride, while explaining their own aims, they kill cows.  
How can they kill the mother, whose milk they drink like that of a wet nurse?  
The young and the old drink milk pudding, but these fools eat the cow's body.  
These morons know nothing, they wander about in ignorance,  
Without looking into one's heart, how can one reach paradise?

Sometimes, as in this poem, Kabir's anger seems to get the better of him. Again, there is compassion expressed for animals, which is associated more with Hindus than Muslims in India.

5. Kabir poem translated by David Lorenzen

Saints, I see the world is mad.  
If I tell the truth they rush to beat me,  
if I lie they trust me.

Legends say that Kabir was persecuted for his radical, iconoclastic views, a claim that is reinforced by his poems, such as this one.

6. Poem by Mirabai, translated by John Stratton Hawley, 2005

My Dark One [Krishna] has gone to an alien land.  
He has left me behind, he's never returned, he's never sent me a single word.  
So I've stripped off my ornaments, jewels and adornments, cut my hair from my head.  
And put on holy garments, all on his account, seeking him in all four directions.  
Unless Mira meets the Dark One, her Lord, she doesn't even want to live.

In this poem, as in most, Mirabai speaks in the first person, giving immediacy to the lines. She uses the conventional names for Krishna ('Dark One') and employs stock images, such removing her jewels and shaving her head, like a widow. But then the poem executes an abrupt shift, when she dresses herself in 'holy' clothes and seeks her lord. This poem is also characteristic of her output in its expression of pain in separation.

7. Poem by Mirabai, translated by John Stratton Hawley, 2005

After making me fall for you so hard, where are you going?  
Until the day I see you, no repose: my life, like a fish washed on shore, flails in agony.  
For your sake I'll make myself a yogini, I'll hurl myself to death on the saw of Benares.  
Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter, and I am his, a slave to his lotus feet.

The theme of this short poem by Mirabai is not separation but rather complete surrender. There is pain, once more, but she also speaks of the pleasure of renunciation (in being a yogini, or female yogi) and devoting herself to Krishna.

8. Poem by Mirabai, translated by John Stratton Hawley, 2005

I am mad with love  
And no one understands my plight.  
Only the wounded  
Understand the agonies of the wounded,  
When the fire rages in the heart.  
Only the jeweller knows the value of the jewel,  
Not the one who lets it go.  
In pain I wander from door to door,  
But could not find a doctor.  
Mira says, Harken, my Master,  
Mira's pain will subside  
When Shyam [Krishna] comes as the doctor.

Here, we again hear the agony of Mira's love for Krishna, and we can almost feel her wounds and inner torment. And in the midst of this extended metaphor of illness, with treatments and a physician, she inserts an enigmatic line about who knows the value of a jewel.

9. Poem by Surdas, translated by John Stratton Hawley, 2005

Awake, Krishna,  
awake the lotus-petals  
open the water-lilies droop  
the bumblebees have left  
the creepers cocks crow,  
and birds chirp on the trees.  
The cows are in the byre lowing;  
they run after their calves;  
the moon fades before the sun.  
Men and women arise  
and joyfully sing their songs;  
Krishna, of hands lotus-like awake,  
for the day is about to dawn.

This poem displays the pure joy and exhilaration of Surdas' poetry, revelling in natural beauty and the pleasure of worshipping Krishna with song and dance.

10. Poem by Surdas, translated by John Stratton Hawley, 2005

Life has stumbled, stumbled, unravelled,  
Roped to politics and salary and sons,  
Without my even noticing, my life has ambled off  
And tangled in a snare of illusions so fool-proof  
That now I cannot break it or loosen its grip  
Sons of the Lord, gatherings of the good—  
I left myself hanging in air without either,  
Like an overeager acrobat who does just one more trick  
Because he cannot bear to close the show.  
What splendour, says Surdas, can you find in flaunting wealth  
When your husband, your lover, has gone?

Here, we have a more reflective Surdas, aware that he has let his life slip away from him. He no longer can distinguish truth from illusion, and chides himself for becoming more concerned with his literary 'acrobatics' than his devotion. The final lines, in which Surdas speaks as a woman, display the gender fluidity that is characteristic of many bhakti poems, flipping between male and female personae.

11. Surdas poem, translator unknown

Lord, heed not my faults!  
You are known as he who sees all as equal,  
At will you can take me across the ocean of existence.  
One iron is used in worship, another in butcher's steel;  
The philosopher's stone counts not merit or fault  
But turns both to purest gold.

One is called 'river.' another a 'rivulet' filled with murky water;  
When they merge they become of one colour and are known  
As 'Sursari' [Ganges], river of gods.  
The soul and the Supreme are given different names,  
But all is one in Sur's Shyam [Krishna].  
This time, take me across, or give up your vow to be saviour!

In this marvellous poem, we hear Surdas crying out for salvation, from his own limitations as a human, from the endless cycle of life-death-rebirth. The poem is somewhat unusual in that it expresses a monistic view that collapses all dualities into a supreme reality. Most devotional poems, and certainly most of Surdas' poems, are devoted to a named god, such as Siva, Vishnu or Krishna. But here, Surdas has delved deeper into the unity that underlies all names and forms.



**Reading**

John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir*, 2005

Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh, *The Bijak of Kabir*, 2000

John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 2004