

A Female against Autonomy: A Study of Meerabai's Poetry

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Meerabai

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Abstract

What is reasonably certain is that Meerabai is not only regarded as a staunch devotee, at least in the post-independent *Bharatiya* process of evolution, but as an ideal for the subjugated class, especially women, with a great affirmativeness, who stood against the prevailing social vices. The role of a true devotee is not limited only to the occult search of any spiritual path or performing rites and following ritualism, but as a revolutionary it is to sustain and uphold the society. All one can discover which is the aim of present study, is to find how Meerabai through

her poems challenged the dominant canonical traditions and sought for liberation. The immersion in divine gives her courage and strength to pose a challenge to the established norms of society.

Keywords: Meerabai, freedom, divine, love, assimilation, devotion

I began working on Meerabai purely by the love of Lord Krishna. No doubt, I had taught and enjoyed the poems of Meera almost a decade ago in one of the degree colleges. When the poems of Meerabai were later deleted from the university syllabus, I was dismayed by proselytizing gloom. For what reason it happened, I had no clue; but an avid interest in reading Meera helped me to understand her sacrament, lassitude, jubilation and her passion for freedom.

Meerabai

Meera is perhaps the most prominent women of *bhakti* movement in India. As a staunch devotee of Lord Krishna, she was born in a royal family in 1498 at Kurki, Rajasthan. She was the daughter of Ratan Singh, the then Rajput ruler. She had a great passion and fascination for spirituality and therefore she was dedicated to Krishna from childhood. Most of the time, she remained busy in singing songs, plucking flowers and offering them to her Lord. She identified herself as the wife of Krishna; ¹ the fact was that her love has mitigated her mundane pains and perennial sufferings. In 1516 Meera was married to Prince Bhoj Raj of the Rajput kingdom of Mewar, considered as the most powerful Rajput state in the early 16th century. The conservative Rajput chiefs expected that Meera would follow traditional rules of family for preserving the dignity and honour of their clan. But Meera showed her soul-bound passion for Krishna; although she emerged as a transgressor who categorically denounced the set orthodox rules and refusing all marital treasures, she did not abandon her husband altogether despite saying “*mere to girdhar nagar dusra na koi.*” (I belong to no one except the Lord)

Meera challenges the appropriation of dominant canonical traditions, especially when after the demise of her husband the family members shoved her to perform *sati* as an honour of a widow. She humbly claimed that she was only betrothed to immortal *Krishna* and thus she

abandoned the palace and left for Brindaban, as if she was an aficionado of dancing on His tunes. She offered her body and soul “as a sacrifice to Giridhara forever.”

Gandhi recognized Meera as a true *satyagrahi*.

Mirabai is said to have offended her husband by following her own conscience, was content to live in separation from him and bore with quiet dignity and resignation all the injuries that are said to have been done to her in order to bend her to husband's will. Both Prahlad and Mirabai practised Satyagraha. It must be remembered, that neither Daniel nor Socrates, neither Prahlad nor Mirabai had any ill will towards their persecutors.²

Pining for Heavenly Immersion: Drink the Nectar

Meera's affection to Krishna is not only a projection of her emotional lyricism; what is perhaps most important is that when the human heart pines for heavenly immersion with the Supreme of the Universe, then all objects seem insignificant and seem to be of minor importance. Meera's significant poem “Drink the Nectar” shows the sublime layering of her orientation to the mundane crisis. The conscious alliteration and deep message in “Drink the Nectar of the Divine Name, O human! Drink the nectar of the Divine Name! Leave the bad company,” makes a demand, in this regard, to transform our mindset and behavior. Following this call, one can attain eternal bliss and seek liberation.

Meera refused to behave as a woman of her caste and class. Contrary to it, she practiced dancing and singing fearlessly for her Lord in the public space of the temple and kept company with holy men and people. Thus, beneath these descriptions, Meera emerges as a courageous, and fervent woman.

Detached from Family and Luxury

Meera takes a very slow journey from a theoretical religion of romantic dreaming in books and statues, to the fully embodied beliefs of a *satyagrahi*. She discards her “inherited

jewels” and prefers to wear plain attire, unlike the red saris. Later it takes the form of an ascetic white.

She feels completely detached from her “family body” and does not accept the authority because she found it extremely difficult to prepare the sacrifice, the meat and so forth. Her defiance is a symbol of self-assertiveness and independence. She does not seem much perturbed after finding a temple of Krishna shut; on the contrary, she prefers to go on indefinite fast, a self-suffering protest as practised by Gandhiji on and on.

A Free Bird, Love for Her Taskmaster

Meera’s poetry presents a vivid picture of her love for her Taskmaster and disregard for world. Shortly after the death of her husband, after only three short years of their marriage, Meera sought for ultimate self-assimilation. For the first time in her life, Meera found herself as a free bird; she felt more content with the jagged alterations in life. Perhaps this is what she was waiting for: now she spent most of her time in the love and meditation towards Krishna. Her only relationship has been with Him; with the idol of Krishna. Her practices became more and more intense. She often sang and danced herself into ecstasies, even in public places like temples.³

Poetry of Love

In her poetry of love, Krishna is talked about as being her bridegroom. She would spend nights and days with Him, thinking of Him day and night. Love granted her the peace and courage to remain steadfast in her devotion. She bore all taunts and maltreatment but never gave up her love for her Lord. The society labeled her as a licentious woman under the suspicion that love was meant only for humans and *Girdhar* was someone Meera secretly met. She, however, endured all the rough treatment and ignored the world altogether focusing on her Lord. She became a *yogini* in search of him, doing away with all the oppositions and restrictions. Bahadur mentions that “Krishna came to her as a bridegroom and she fancied she was wedded to him with all the ceremonies attending marriage. Ever since that moment she considered herself to be Krishna’s bride and used to weep for him night and day till her eyes became red with lack of sleep”⁴

Her Religion was Only Devotion to the Lord

Meera asserts that her religion was only devotion to the Lord, emphasizing on her right to a direct relationship. The charge “by interacting with people of low-caste, she persecuted the royal honor” reveals her opposition to the injustice of the caste system, in the name of religion and society’s norms. Meera was asked to accept that her “duties to her husband” were to produce a child. Meera replied, “I’m the soul, not the body. I’m an emotion, not a statue of society norms,” demonstrating that she had fully renounced the “social body” in favor of her spiritual self.

Meera is considered as an embodiment of the fierce spirit of devotional rebellion for she dared to raise her voice against the injustice which was executed in the society at multiple levels. Her poetry carried more weight owing to the aristocratic background and the powerful position she held in spite of the fact that she denounced the elite status. In a poem, she says:

*taatmaatbandhubhraatapnana koi chanddaikulkokaan, kakarega he koi
ansuanjalseenchseenchprem bel boyidasimiraprabhu lagan lagi ab mohin*

(I have no father, no mother, no relatives or brothers. I have broken family ties; who can do anything? I have spoken of my love through my tears. Servant Meera has fallen in love with the lord)⁵

The *rana*, the then ruler of Mewar tried his best to stop her; in fact, on many occasions he tried to punctuate her voice by killing her because of those social transgressions. In his entire attempts, rana’s blasphemous behavior cut far deeper, the most gruesome was when he sent a cup of poison and Meera drank it as holy water or *prasadam* of His master. Meera asserts:

visakapyalaranajibhejya,
pivitamirahansi re mirakeprabhugirdharanagara,
sahajamilaavinasi re

(The Rana sent me a cup of poison I drank it off
And laughed and laughed! My lord is Girdhara,

I am his slave;
I have won effortlessly that eternal beings grace.⁶

Protection from Above

Meera was 'divine,' circled and protected by the grace of Heaven and so not only *rana*, but all others were surprised when she remained completely unaffected. Ultimately, she makes Brindhavan, the most loved place of Krishna, as her abode and merges herself with other devotees.

A Role Model for Today's Women

The theoretical bottom line of this paper indicates, in fact, a shift to see Meera and her poetry; what little maybe I draw here is that Meera – through a radical transformation in a woman's behavior, especially when the society was too crass and bellicose – emerges as a role model for today's women. Apparently not caring for what others might assume, Meera points out, "Some blame me, some praise me, but I'll only sing the praise of Govind." She did offer her resistance against the hegemonic social structures and she challenged the status quo. In her heart, Meera had a deep affection and devotion to the Supreme, who perhaps altered her role remarkably. Through her determined resolution, she proved the power of 'devotion' and 'strength.'

¹jake sir more mukut, meropatisoye -- One who wears the peacock crown is my husband
Chaturvedi, B. Meera Bai. Delhi: Books For All, 2002.

²Rowlett Act & Satyagraha Prof. Dr. Yogendra Yadav. Online article
<http://gandhiking.ning.com/profiles/blogs/rowlett-act-satyagraha-1>.

³Women Bhakta Poets, MadhuKishwar, editor, Manushi, nos. 50, 51,52, January-June,
New Delhi, India, 1989.

⁴ Krishna Bahadur, *Mirabai and her padas*. New Delhi: MunshiramManoharlal
publishers, 2002. 18.

⁵Subramaniam, Krishna. *Mystic Songs of Meera*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 2006. 34-35.

⁶ Ibid, 82-83.

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