

MEERABAI: AWAKENING SHAKTI

SHIBANI AICH

Abstract: Meerabai, known as a great devotee of Krishna, epitomizes pure devotion. At the same time her life is a source of inspiration to women who want to chart their own course in the society. Struggling against social and religious dogmas of her time, she finally emerged victorious in her spiritual pursuit by the dint of her invincible *shakti*.

Keywords: Bhakti, Contemporary, Dogmas, KRISHNA, Meerabai, Shakti, Women.

Introduction: Meerabai is like a pole star among *bhaktas* whose songs of love for her beloved Giridhar Gopal [Lord Krishna] remain unparalleled in the genre of *Bhakti Sangeet*. The name 'Meera' has become synonymous with the fervor of true devotion. Meerabai was a rare amalgam of great moral strength, indomitable will, undaunted conviction and unprecedented fortitude. Born into the Rajput warrior clan, she demonstrated all the qualities that a Rajput is known to possess – valor, determination, will power, heroism and loyalty – except in Meera these qualities found expression not on the battlefield, but in devotion to her beloved Giridhar Gopal.

A study of her life reveals an inextricable connection between her devotional pursuit and her struggle against orthodox dogma. Literary critic Kankamal Udatav observes:

Meerabai's struggle and her sadhana [spiritual practice] are inter-dependant and also mutually energizing. Her devotion lends an inner discipline of faith to her protest and her protest gives a glow to her devotion... And because of her tejasvita [majesty], fearlessly defying all the charges laid against her by her royal family, she remained unconquered.... That is why her protesting voice is comparatively so powerful [9].

Literary critic Ashish Tripathi says:

Meera's poetry is a manifesto of liberation of women – deprived of their human rights and living under the shadows of restrictions. Her poetry vibrates with sharp pain and notes of pining for liberty, equality, self-respect, freedom of expression and a desire to live their dreams [6].

Meerabai is eternalized not just by the virtue of her devotional renditions but because she continues to inspire women with the rare strength of her character. In the face of all opposition and repressive measures to subdue her ardent devotion to Giridhar Gopal, she remained undeterred and finally triumphed in her devout pursuit. At the same time her courageous actions challenged patriarchal dominance and asserted her right to freedom of choice.

For centuries, in this primarily patriarchal society, women have been subjugated and even punished for being born female. Even in today's so-called progressive society, women are discriminated in all walks of life, in every strata of the society. Social conditioning accords women the stature of a second-class citizen, and considers them as dependents. From childhood gender

discrimination within the family, society and community plants the seed of inferiority. French feminist Simone de Beauvoir rightly observed in her book *The Second Sex* that one is born a female, but *made* a woman.

By emphasizing the role of men in her life as protector and provider, a girl child is taught to believe she is weak and that she is helpless. 'As you sow, so shall you reap' – goes the popular adage – thus a woman grows up to believe that strength and power is the dominion of men, while she is expected to live as his shadow. In contemporary society, gender discrimination has taken on a more subtle form; it is carefully camouflaged under the veneer of education. A peep into the text books of primary education reveals a reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Faced with this ingrained disadvantage in the culture, how does one breakthrough such a vicious circle? One of the means is by studying the lives of women like Meerabai, who bravely rowed against the current of social norms and religious dogma.

Contrary to the basic tenets of spirituality, gender discrimination has been perpetuated in the lives of many women saint. Most of them, including Meerabai, were forced to give up family life under pressure from hostile relatives, whereas male saints could pursue their spiritual ideal even within their domestic milieu. Swami Vivekananda proclaimed, "Freedom is of the nature of the soul, it is its birthright." Women, through the ages, have been denied this fundamental right of the soul. Meerabai's life is a victorious celebration of a woman who claimed her birthright, overcoming all obstacles in a rare feat of faith in the Divine. She sings:

I do not observe the rules of worldly decorum.

Fearlessly, Sister will I beat the drum.

O my companion, I will sail the boat

Of the Name of Shyam

And cross the Ocean of Becoming [1].

Meerabai faced a double challenge – a higher spiritual endeavour that was subject to immense skepticism, and her gender identity. The main obstacle on her path was orthodox dogma which failed to perceive the subtlety of the true nature of existence.

Most biographers concede that Meerabai belonged to the royal family of Merta in Jodhpur. Meerabai was born to Ratan Singh and his wife Jhala Bai around 1504 A.D. Legend says that when Meerabai was around five years old, her mother told her that Giridhar Gopal was her bridegroom. This observation was taken to heart by the

child Meera who henceforth firmly believed that she was betrothed to her beloved Giridhar Gopal. When Meerabai came of age, she was given in marriage to Bhoja Raj, the heir of Chittor in the year 1516 A.D. This marriage was a marriage of convenience – a tool to cement a political alliance between two Rajput royal families. Although Meerabai relented and married according to custom, within herself she remained the betrothed of her Giridhar Gopal in thought, word and deed. It was this loyalty to her eternal consort that became a cause for much perturbation in her marital life. In Indian society, a woman supposedly takes a new birth after she gets married and is expected to cast herself in the mould of her husband's family. Meerabai however incurred the wrath of her mother-in-law when she refused to bow her head to the marital family's deity, Goddess Durga, declaring boldly that since she had already surrendered to Giridhar Gopal, she could not bow down to any other deity. While this declaration was condemned as a shocking act of disobedience, it was actually a line drawn by Meerabai to assert her personal space within the marital sphere. Since one's chosen deity and practice of religion is an absolutely personal choice, Meerabai's refusal to accept her marital family deity is an assertion of this fundamental individual choice.

Contemporary gender studies draw attention to a woman's right to her own body. It emphasizes that a woman is not an object for a man's pleasure. Unfortunately, within marriage it is conventionally believed that the duty of a wife is to satisfy her husband in all respects. This is now a topic of much debate whose implications were practiced by Meerabai centuries ago. Although she was forced to marry Bhoj Raj, as the betrothed of her divine Giridhar Gopal, she stood her ground to protect her virginity. Meerabai proclaims in her poem:

*Mira takes refuge at Thy feet:
For Thy sake she has remained a virgin
From birth to birth [1].*

Jagdishwar Chaturvedi observes: *She is the first Indian writer who pleaded the case of a woman's social rights and specially her right over her mind and body. In this sense she is a feminist [2]*

According to the tradition of her time, it was imperative for a woman in a royal household to observe *pardah*, a curtain or screen that kept women separate from men or strangers. Meerabai rejected this strict observance of *pardah* as it would have been a deterrent to her path of devotion. Much to the consternation of her in-laws she would venture out to mingle freely with holy men. Observing the *pardah* would have curbed her freedom to do this. Also, the *pardah* would have hindered her from expressing her love for her Lord, as lost in divine ecstasy Meerabai would sing and dance in front of His image. Symbolically, the *pardah* is a veil of separation that reinforces the idea of gender disparity whereas the whole purpose of spiritual life is to seek harmony in the underlying unity. Any form of discrimination implies

ignorance of one's true nature – Pure Consciousness. Meerabai strived to cast off this veil of ignorance so how could she hide behind a physical veil?

Although the system of *pardah* is not observed at large in contemporary society, the essence of *pardah* prevails. Men still expect women of the family to confine themselves to domestic roles even though they may have been well educated. In the name of protection of family tradition, women are often relegated to stay within the four walls of their kitchen. It is sad that even those educated to contribute to society are often denied their right to social and economic freedom. Their potential remains unexploited. Moreover most women accept this predicament in a docile manner, pleading helplessness in the face of male pressure within the family. Meerabai's sense of self-esteem demonstrates how courage in a conviction is a means to an end. Her relentless pursuit to follow her heart is a source of inspiration to women struggling to assert their freedom to choose.

Spiritually, Meerabai made choices which even now could be seen as unconventional. It is widely believed that her Guru, Sant Raidas, was from the untouchable community of cobblers [*chamars*]. This in itself was a bold statement of the rejection of caste hierarchy. When 'Princess' Meera bowed down to the untouchable Guru Raidas, it naturally created a furor in orthodox society and in the royal household. The echoes of her defiant act still resound in the folklore of the lower-caste people in Western Rajasthan who applaud her for this act of rare courage and tenacity. John Stratton Hawley commented:

The idea that royalty would seek spiritual counsel from the lowest reaches of society has remained very much alive in the Mirabai tradition. When the sociologist Parita Mukta sought out the Mira celebrated among itinerant singers and lower-caste people in western Rajasthan and neighbouring Gujarat, she found this Mirabai at the core of things. For them, it was not just a rejection of patriarchal conventions when Mira snubbed the rana, but a rejection of social injustice broadly – of caste [3].

Folklore and legends narrate the after effects of this act of sheer defiance of propriety by Meerabai. A legend says how Meerabai was held captive in her royal household and not allowed to venture out to meet her Guru as He belonged to the lower caste. But it is said that Meerabai escaped from her tower in the middle of the night by tying her saris together and making a rope out of them. This unconventional behavior of Meerabai was an anathema in the royal household. Despite admonitions from her mother-in-law and other relatives in her husband's family, Meerabai remained rooted in her spiritual pursuit.

It is an unfortunate fact that many women *bhaktas* have faced severe criticism from their immediate relations and society for their nonconformist actions. Although they are a beacon of love for the people, they are maligned by more orthodox social guardians in the name of decorum and decency. Meerabai was a victim

of this so-called guardian society that claimed to preserve custom and tradition, but was actually imprisoned by its own conventions, without the understanding to question, let alone penetrate them as Meerabai did.

Even today factions of the orthodox society charge Meerabai with failing to perform her *dharma* as a wife. It is still considered sacrilegious to name a girl child 'Meera' in certain Rajput families. However, biographers have ascertained that she remained a devoted wife to the king and performed all her regular secular duties without compromising on her devotion to her beloved Giridhar Gopal. While acknowledging and respecting the *dharma* of a wife in the society, she upheld the higher *dharma* of seeking the Lord. A parallel to this can be found in *Srimad Bhagvatam*. When the gopis left their homes and familial duties to meet Lord Krishna in the middle of the night for the *rasa-lila*, the Lord urged them to return home to fulfill their *dharma* towards their family. The gopis judiciously pointed out that since the Lord is the source of *dharma*, all other *dharma*s become subservient to Him. The same idea is reflected in Meerabai's poems. She says:

*It is good to remain loyal
To one's own husband,
Even if he be poor and a leper
On this all are agreed.*

*My beloved is like the Indestructible Principle,
Love of Him is true love [1].*

Endowed with this mature discrimination, Meerabai proclaimed that since her beloved Giridhar Gopal was the 'Indestructible Principle', love for Him alone could be 'true love'. The word 'Indestructible' means 'that which always exist': meaning 'Existence' itself. Meerabai's love was for the eternal principle of God consciousness. It was so strongly ingrained in her that she even defied the age-old custom of *sati* [self-immolation on the pyre of a husband] on the death of her husband Bhoj Raj. Meerabai considered herself the eternal bride of Giridhar Gopal. While this act of defiance was condemned by Rajput society and became a cause for great indignation in the royal household, Meerabai remained fearless in the face of calumny.

A nationalist like Gandhiji found in Meerabai the 'ideal' for inspiring women to live for higher ideals. When Gandhiji was asked whether a wife could go against the will of her husband to take up service of the nation, he supported the claim of a wife to devote herself to a noble purpose. He cited the example of Meerabai in support of his argument. In his opinion, every wife, "has a perfect right to take her own course and meekly brave the consequences when she knows herself to be in the right and when her resistance is for a nobler purpose" [10]. Mata Amritanandamayi, Amma, the contemporary spiritual leader, also faced dogmatic factions and gender inequality in her own life. She observes:

It has been widely believed that women and the cultures in which they live will awaken through education and material development. But time has taught us that this

concept is too limited. Only when women imbibe the eternal wisdom of spirituality, along with modern education, will the power within them awaken – and they will rise to action [4].

Meerabai's poems clearly indicate that scriptural knowledge of *Puranas* and *Itihasas* like *Srimad Bhagvatam*, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* formed a part of her education and laid the foundation of her unshakeable faith. Today, educational bodies recognize the need to undo the making of gender stereotypes in text books but the question should be asked, "Is this sociological approach sufficient?" Text books reveal facts and figures that feed the intellect. The IQ [Intelligence Quotient] is being fed but what is happening to the EQ [Emotional Quotient] and the SQ [Spiritual Quotient]? There appears to be a void where education is incomplete: imparted knowledge serves the purpose of making a living but not the understanding of life. According to spiritual leaders, this gap needs to be filled in order to inculcate moral and spiritual values. Only then will it be possible to really empower women by making them aware of the infinite potential inherent in the Higher Self. The present education system is keen on making women individual in their own right by instilling in them a strong sense of individuality and a desire for freedom. Women's emancipation has become the clarion call of today but there is lack of clarity in the true implication of the word emancipation – it should not be the right to do whatever one feels and thinks in imitation of men. Amma says:

It is impossible to attain real freedom by imitating men. If women themselves turn their backs on the feminine principle, this will culminate in the utter failure of women and society. Then the problems of the world will not be resolved, but only aggravated... [4]

A woman's freedom and rising has to begin within herself.

Also, for shakti, pure power, to awaken and arise in a woman, she first has to become aware of her weaknesses. She can then overcome those weaknesses through her will power, selfless service and spiritual practice [4]

Meerabai's life stands as a testimony to the power of feminine energy [*shakti*], which when awakened leads to true emancipation. Its steadfast power blazes through conventions that try to curb a woman's right to chart her own course in society. When secular power and authority is so discriminating against women, only by addressing her true identity can women rise to manifest the necessary blend of compassion, strength and courage. It is this harmony of the masculine and feminine principles, the state of *purinatwam* [perfection], that make an individual complete and able to express humanity in its fullness. This appeal to the Higher Self can promote secular reform in every field of life just as light dispels darkness. This is the message we learn from the lives of Saints in all cultures. Mata Amritanandamayi, celebrating the feminine, echoes the life of Bhakta Meerabai, when she observes:

The inner strength of women flows like a river. If the current of a river encounters a mountain, the river will

flow around it. If there is a cluster of rocks, the river will flow through them. Sometimes, it may flow under or over them. Similarly, feminine strength has the capacity to

move toward the goal, overcoming any obstacle it encounters [5].

References:

1. Alston, A.J., trans. *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1980. [p. 48, p. 55, p. 44]
2. Chaturvedi, Jagdishwar. *Strivadi Sahitya Vimarsh*. New Delhi: Anamika Publishers and Distributors Ltd. [p. 32]
3. Hawley, John Stratton. Afterword. *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*. By Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004. [p. 83]
4. Mata Amritanandamayi. *The Awakening of Universal Motherhood*. Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust: Kollam, 2003, [p. 34, p.56, p. 56, p. 30]
5. Mata Amritanandamayi. *The Infinite Potential of Women*. Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust: Kollam, 2008.
6. Tripathi, Ashish. "Stri Asmita ke Prashna aur Mira". *Meera ek Mulyankan*. Ed. Arun Chaturvedi. Jaipur: Shyam Prakashan, 2006. [p. 140]
7. *Srimad Bhagvatam*. Trans. Swami Tapasyananda. Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math.
8. Swami Vivekananda. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Vol. 2, Kolkata: Advaita Ashram.
9. Udavat, Kankamal. "Bhakti Andolan aur Meera ka Vyaktitva". *Meera ka Vyaktitva aur Krititva*. Ed. Sanjay Malhotra, Om Anand Saraswati, and Satyanarayan Samdani. Chittorgarh: Mira Smriti Sansthan. [p. 158]
10. http://www.gandhi-manibhavan.org/activities/essay_breakingshackles.htm.
