



Breaking the Fetters of Family and Shame: Meerabai, Krishna Bhakti, and the Gendered Politics of Devotion in Sixteenth-Century Rajasthan

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Abstract— Meerabai (also Mirabai; c. 1498–c. 1546), a Rathore princess of Merta who was married into the Sisodia house of Mewar, is among the most widely remembered women saints of the North Indian bhakti tradition. Later hagiography presents her as a widow who refused sati, rejected the honor codes of a Rajput court, sang and danced in public temples, kept the company of sadhus across caste lines, and survived attempts on her life before vanishing into the image of Krishna at Dwarka. This article reconstructs that story with scholarly caution. Court chronicles of Merta and Mewar are almost silent on her; the earliest firm literary notice appears in Nabhadās's *Bhaktamal* (c. 1600). The immense *padavali* sung in her name is a layered, co-authored corpus rather than a closed authorial canon (Hawley, 2005; Martin, 2023). Reading life-narrative, attributed Hindi and Rajasthani *padas*, and modern critical literature together, the essay argues that Meerabai's significance lies less in a fully recoverable biography than in a durable public language of devotion that made gender, caste, and royal honor contestable in the name of Krishna.



Keywords— Meerabai, Mirabai, bhakti, Krishna, Rajasthan, gender, Rajput honor, *padavali*, hagiography, women's spirituality

Introduction

Few figures in the religious history of Rajasthan occupy as charged a place as Meerabai. In popular memory she is at once princess and wandering ascetic, widow and bride of Krishna, victim of a hostile court and victor who drinks poison as *charanamrita*. Temples at Merta, Chittor, and Dwarka, countless bhajan mandalis, school textbooks, nationalist biographies, feminist recoveries, and film and television serials all claim her. That abundance is itself a historical fact. As Martin (2023) has shown in her study of how the saint was “made,” Meerabai is known less as a single recoverable subject than as a tradition of story and song through which communities have argued about devotion, womanhood, and authority across four centuries.

This article does three things. First, it situates the conventional life-story against the thinness of contemporary documentation and the richness of later hagiography (Hawley, 2005; Taft, 2002). Second, it analyzes the social,

gendered, and religious pressures that the tradition says she faced at the Sisodia court and in the wider Vaishnava world (Mukta, 1994; Sangari, 1990). Third, it reads selected Hindi *padas* attributed to her as the principal medium through which those pressures were answered—not as modern political tracts, but as songs of a love that refused to stay inside the *zenana* (Alston, 1980; Chaturvedi, 1973). The aim is neither to dissolve Meerabai into legend nor to treat every later miracle as eyewitness report, but to show why the figure remains historically consequential.

Historical Context and the Problem of Sources

The political world into which Meerabai was born was one of Rajput consolidation and accelerating Mughal pressure. Merta, founded by her grandfather Rao Duda, belonged to a Rathore branch related to the house of Jodhpur. Mewar, under Rana Sanga, was the preeminent Sisodia kingdom of southern Rajasthan and the last major Rajput coalition against Babur. The marriage of a Merta princess to Sanga's

eldest son Bhoj Raj in 1516, the date most scholars now accept, was a political alliance as much as a household event (Hawley, 2005; Martin, 2023). Bhoj Raj died of battle wounds in 1521. Sanga and Meerabai's father Ratan Singh Rathore both fell in the aftermath of the Battle of Khanwa (1527). The Mewar court that the young widow inhabited was therefore a court of military trauma, succession anxiety, and heightened concern for Rajput honor (maryada).

That honor system is crucial for any reading of Meerabai's resistance. Rajput royal women were expected to practice seclusion, uphold the kul's reputation, accept arranged marriage as a political instrument, and, in the most extreme construction of widowhood, consider sati (Sangari, 1990). Public singing and dancing, association with male sadhus, and the claim that Krishna—not the earthly husband or his lineage—was one's true spouse cut against all three expectations. Later tellers made this collision the center of the saint's life.

Yet the documentary trail is uneven. Inscriptions and dynastic genealogies of Merta and Mewar do not furnish a contemporary royal biography of Meerabai. Taft (2002) has noted how cold the archival trail becomes the closer one approaches the early sixteenth century. The earliest widely cited literary notice is the brief praise in Nabhadās's Bhaktamal, composed around 1600, which already presents her as one who broke the fetters of family and the chains of shame (Nabhadās, ca. 1600/n.d.; Martin, 2023). Priyadas's 1712 commentary on Nabhadās supplies the narrative architecture still familiar today: the childhood gift of a Krishna image, the unwilling marriage, the refusal of the family goddess, the poison cup and the cobra in a basket, the departure from Chittor, and the final disappearance into the deity at Dwarka (Priyadas, 1712/n.d.). Muhnot Nainsi's seventeenth-century Khyat records, with the caution of "people say," that Bhoj Raj married Mira Rathore (Taft, 2002). From these slender early notices a vast later literature grew.

A parallel problem attends the poems. Thousands of padas circulate under Meerabai's name in Rajasthani, Braj Bhasha, and later standardized Hindi. Hawley (2005), working from the oldest manuscript layers, has argued that poems which would securely "tie Mirabai to her own century do not seem to exist" in the way a modern critical edition might wish. The first-person signature "Mira" at the close of a pad is a convention of bhakti song, not an autograph. The corpus is therefore best treated as a living, co-authored voice: songs composed by a historical woman, songs composed in her manner, and songs through which later singers inhabited her predicament (Martinez, 2018; Martin, 2023). That does not empty the poetry of historical meaning. It means the historian must read the songs as

evidence of a tradition that found in Meerabai a usable first person.

From Kudki and Merta to the Court of Mewar

Standard reconstructions place Meerabai's birth around 1498 at Kudki (Kurki) in present-day Pali district, in the household of Rao Ratan Singh Rathore, younger son of Rao Duda of Merta (Alston, 1980; Hawley & Juergensmeyer, 1988). Her mother is often named Veer Kanwar (Vir Kunwari) and is said to have died while Meerabai was a child. The girl was raised in a Vaishnava environment. Nabhadās (ca. 1600/n.d.) lists several men of the Merta line among Krishna devotees; family piety, not only individual rebellion, is part of the story. A recurrent childhood episode—present in Priyadas (1712/n.d.) and endlessly retold—has a visiting sadhu give the child an image of Giridhar (Krishna as the lifter of Govardhan). When she asked who would be her bridegroom, her mother or grandfather is said to have pointed to the image. The anecdote explains, in narrative form, the later claim that her marriage to Krishna preceded and outranked her marriage to Bhoj Raj.

In 1516 she was married to Bhoj Raj, crown prince of Mewar and son of Rana Sanga. Older Gujarati and some colonial accounts had made her the wife of Rana Kumbha (r. 1433–1468), a chronological impossibility for a woman born near 1500. Later historians corrected the identification (Taft, 2002). The correction places Meerabai in the generation that faced Babur, widowhood, and a contested succession under Vikramaditya and later Udai Singh.

Hagiography insists that she refused to consummate the earthly marriage in any sense that displaced Krishna, would not worship the Sisodia kuldevi in the manner required, received sadhus in her private shrine, and sang in spaces that mixed ranks and sexes (Kishwar & Vanita, 1989; Martin, 2023). After Bhoj Raj's death she refused sati. Whether every detail is factual, the pattern is consistent: Meerabai is remembered as a woman who treated the palace as a temporary lodging and the temple as her true household.

Societal and Familial Resistance

The resistance attributed to Meerabai's marital family is usually personified as "the Rana." In different tellings this figure is her husband, her father-in-law, or—most often in modern reconstructions—her brother-in-law Vikramaditya, who ruled Mewar in the unsettled years after Sanga (Hawley, 2005). The Rana of the songs is less a biographical identification than a structural opponent: the voice of kul, shame (laj), and royal command.

Three legendary assassination attempts dominate the later vitae. A cup of poison is sent as charanamrita; Meerabai drinks it and is unharmed. A basket said to contain a garland

or prasad conceals a cobra; she finds an image of Krishna, or the snake becomes a garland. A bed of thorns or nails is prepared for her; she sleeps unhurt (Kishwar & Vanita, 1989; Priyadas, 1712/n.d.). These episodes belong to the grammar of saintly ordeal. Their historical status is unverifiable. Their cultural work is clear. They convert persecution into proof: the court that tries to kill the devotee only discloses that Krishna, not the Rana, governs the outcome. Songs that mention the poison cup fold the ordeal back into performance. The most widely sung version is the pad of the ankle-bells (Chaturvedi, 1973):

पग घूँघरू बाँध मीरा नाची रे

मैं तो मेरे नारायण की आपहि हो गई दासी रे

लोग कहै मीरा भई बावरी, न्यात कहै कुलनासी रे

विष का प्याला राणाजी भेज्या, पीवत मीरा हाँसी रे

मीरा के प्रभु गिरिधर नागर, सहज मिले अविनासी रे॥

Tying bells to her ankles, Mira danced.

"I have become, of my own will, the servant of my Narayan."

People say Mira has gone mad; the clan says she is the ruin of the family.

The Rana sent a cup of poison; Mira drank it laughing.

Mira's Lord is Giridhar Nagar; the Imperishable met her with ease.

The pad compresses an entire social drama into a few lines. Dance with ghunghru is temple performance and public female motion, both suspect in a royal zenana. The charge of madness (bawari) and of being kul-nashi—destroyer of lineage—names the precise injury a Rajput household feared: a woman whose conduct could be cited against the honor of the house (Sangari, 1990). The laugh with which she drinks the poison is the conversion of a death sentence into rasa. Mukta (1994), studying twentieth-century low-caste and peasant communities that sing Mira, has shown how this episode is heard not only as miracle but as the memory of a woman who would not be silenced by landlords and husbands.

Familial resistance also had a quieter register: isolation, slander, pressure to remarry or to accept a confined widowhood, and the demand that she abandon the company of itinerant Vaishnavas. Some reconstructions suggest that political suspicion compounded religious disapproval. A princess who received wandering sadhus in a fortress recently at war might be imagined, by a nervous court, as a security risk as well as a scandal (Hawley, 2005). What the songs themselves emphasize is not espionage but incompatibility of loyalties. The palace wants a daughter-

in-law; Mira answers that she already has a husband whose crown is a peacock feather.

Gender, Widowhood, and the Rajput Code

Gender is not an optional theme laid over Meerabai's spirituality; it is the condition under which her devotion became visible as transgression. In the household ideology of a sixteenth-century Rajput court, a woman's religious life was supposed to support, not rival, her roles as wife, daughter-in-law, and potential mother of heirs (Sangari, 1990). Widowhood intensified the demand. A royal widow who refused sati already stepped outside one ideal of heroic femininity. A royal widow who then claimed to be a bride—of God—stepped outside another.

Sangari's (1990) influential essay remains the most rigorous warning against a simple liberationist reading. She argues that the female voice in bhakti, including Mira's, is produced inside patriarchal structures even as it strains them. The devotee's abjection before a male deity can reproduce, in a spiritual key, the dependence expected of a wife. Male bhaktas routinely adopt the voice of the waiting woman (virahini) as a spiritual technique; when a woman saint uses the same voice, the politics change, but they do not automatically become modern feminism. Meerabai does not write a treatise against marriage. She over-identifies with marriage and then relocates it. Krishna is mero pati, my husband. The earthly marriage is not theorized away; it is relativized until it cannot command her body or her song.

That relocation is stated with canonical clarity in the pad that generations of singers treat as her signature creed (Alston, 1980; Chaturvedi, 1973):

मेरे तो गिरधर गोपाल दूसरो न कोई॥

जाके सिर है मोरपखा, मेरो पति सोई

तात मात भ्रात बंधु आपनो न कोई॥

छांड़ि दई कुलकी कानि, कहा करिहै कोई

संतन दिग बैठि बैठि लोकलाज खोई॥

चुनरीके किये टूक ओढ़ लीन्हीं लोई

मोती मूंगे उतार बनमाला पोई॥

अंसुवन जल सींचि-सींचि प्रेम-बेलि बोई

अब तो बेल फैल गई, आणंद फल होई॥

दूध की मथनियां बड़े प्रेम से बिलोई

माखन जब काढ़ि लियो, छाछ पिये कोई॥

भगति देखि राजी हुई, जगत देखि रोई

दासी मीरा लाल गिरधर, तारो अब मोही॥

Mine is Giridhar Gopal; there is no other.

He whose head bears the peacock plume—that one is my husband.

Father, mother, brother, kinsman: I have none of my own.
I have thrown off the honor of the clan; what can anyone do?
Sitting among the saints, I have lost the world's shame.
I tore the bridal scarf to rags and wrapped myself in coarse wool.
I took off pearls and coral and strung a garland of wild-forest flowers.
Watered with tears, I planted the vine of love.
Now the vine has spread; it bears the fruit of bliss.
With great love I churned the pot of milk.
When I had taken the butter, let who will drink the whey.
Seeing devotion I rejoiced; seeing the world I wept.
Mira the servant says: O beloved Giridhar, save me now.

The poem is a systematic inventory of renunciation. Kinship is declared empty. Kul-kani—the honor-code of the lineage—is discarded. Lok-laj, the shame that polices women in public, is lost in the company of saints. The visual markers of a married Rajput woman, the chunari and the jewelry of pearls and coral, are exchanged for the coarse wrap and vanamala of an itinerant devotee (Kishwar & Vanita, 1989). The butter-and-whey image, drawn from Krishna's own childhood theft of butter, turns spiritual discrimination into kitchen labor: keep the essence, leave the residue to the world. Gendered domestic skill becomes theological method.

At the same time the speaker remains “dasi Mira,” Mira the maidservant. The social vocabulary of female service is not abolished; it is redirected. This is why Sangari's (1990) caution and Martin's (2023) emphasis on multiple Miras both remain necessary. Communities have heard in these lines a charter for women's spiritual independence. Other communities have heard an ideal of total wifely surrender, merely pointed at a better husband. The historical power of the padavali is that it can sustain both hearings without collapsing into either.

Religious and Spiritual Challenges

Meerabai's conflict was not only with a palace. It was also with the institutional religious field of her time. North Indian Krishna bhakti in the early sixteenth century was itself plural: the growing influence of Vallabha's pushtimarg, the Gaudiya presence around Vrindavan, older

nirguna currents associated with figures such as Raidas and Kabir, and local Rajasthani Vaishnava practice (Hawley, 2005; Hawley & Juergensmeyer, 1988). Later tradition sometimes names Raidas (Ravidas) as Mira's guru. Chronology makes a direct discipleship difficult to prove, but the claim is ideologically eloquent. It attaches a Rajput princess to a saint remembered as a Chamar leatherworker and so restates bhakti's promise that birth does not ration access to God (Mukta, 1994).

Vallabhite sources, by contrast, are often cool or hostile. Mira does not fit easily into a sampradaya that organized devotion around hereditary maharajas, temple seva, and household purity. A woman who danced in public, crossed caste lines, and acknowledged no institutional guru on Vallabha's terms was difficult to canonize inside that structure. Hawley (2005) notes that she remains formally unaffiliated and is in some lineages explicitly set aside. Her Krishna is not primarily the child of the haveli ritual or the royal patron of a sect. He is Giridhar Nagar, the elegant mountain-lifter, addressed as husband, healer, and thief of the mind.

That address has theological consequences. Conventional temple hierarchy places the deity above the worshipper and the priest between them. Mira's madhurya-bhakti shortens the distance until it becomes the intimacy of lovers, with all the jealousy, waiting, accusation, and joy that the gopi tradition had already made available. She does not deny Krishna's supremacy; she refuses to let supremacy mean remoteness. In several padas the soul and the Lord are imagined as bound by a relationship that no priest, husband, or Rana can cancel. This is less a doctrine of metaphysical equality than a relational theology in which the devotee's first-person desire is treated as authoritative knowledge (Alston, 1980; Martin, 2023).

A different spiritual emphasis appears in songs that treat the Name as inexhaustible wealth. Here the courtly world of treasure, dowry, and royal gift is inverted (Chaturvedi, 1973):

पायो जी म्हें तो राम रतन धन पायो।
वस्तु अमोलक दी म्हारे सतगुरु, किरपा कर अपनायो॥
जनम-जनम की पूँजी पाई, जग में सभी खोवायो।
खरच न खूटै चोर न लूटै, दिन-दिन बढ़त सवायो॥
सत की नाँव खेवटिया सतगुरु, भवसागर तर आयो।
'मीरा' के प्रभु गिरिधर नागर, हरख-हरख जस पायो॥

I have found it—the jewel-wealth of the Name of Ram.

My true guru gave me a priceless thing and, in grace, made me his own.

*I gained the capital of birth upon birth; I lost
whatever the world could claim.*

*Spent, it is not depleted; stolen, it cannot be
looted; day by day it increases a quarter more.*

*The boat is truth, the boatman the true guru; I
have crossed the ocean of becoming.*

*Mira's Lord is Giridhar Nagar; in joy upon joy I
have found his praise.*

Ram and Giridhar stand together in the same pad, a reminder that Mira's idiom is Vaishnava rather than narrowly sectarian. The economic metaphors—capital, expenditure, theft, compound increase—are those of a woman who knew what royal wealth looked like and chose a treasure that a hostile court could not confiscate. Alston's (1980) translation-anthology, based on Chaturvedi's (1973) Hindi selection, helped carry this register to readers outside the bhajan community. Viraha, the pain of separation, supplies a further challenge: it refuses the consolation of completed ritual. Songs in which Mira watches the monsoon or searches for a physician who can treat the wound of love keep desire unfinished. Within Rajasthan those songs join a woman's waiting to the region's seasonal calendar. Devotion here is not an escape from landscape; it is a way of inhabiting it.

Poetry, Voice, and the Question of Authorship

A research account must pause over what it means to print "Hindi poems of Meerabai." The oldest layers are not modern standard Hindi but a mixture of Rajasthani and Braj Bhasha, later regularized by anthologists. Chaturvedi's (1973) Padavali produced the relatively stable texts quoted here. Manuscript work by Hawley (2005) shows how few padas can be pushed securely into the first half of the sixteenth century. Martinez (2018) describes an "autobiographical pose": later singers use Mira's first person to narrate their own transformations. Martin's (2023) phrase "many Miras" names that openness without denying that a sixteenth-century woman almost certainly stood at the beginning of the chain. Three features remain robust across layers: exclusive attachment to Krishna as husband; acceptance of stigma—madness, caste-mixing, the loss of laj—as its price; and a sensory piety of bells, dance, tears, and the dark color of the beloved.

A quieter pad of presence rather than combat deserves quotation, because the tradition is not only oppositional. It is also contemplative (Chaturvedi, 1973):

बसो मेरे नैनन में नंदलाल।

मोर मुकुट मकराकृत कुण्डल, अरुण तिलक दिए भाल।

मोहनि मूर्ति, साँवरि सूरति, नैना बने बिसाल।

अधर-सुधा-रस मुरली राजत, उर बैजंती-माल॥

छुद्र घंटिका कटि-तट सोभित, नूपुर सबद रसाल।

मीरा प्रभु संतन सुखदाई, भक्त बछल गोपाल॥

Dwell in my eyes, O Nandalal.

*Peacock crown, makara earrings, a red mark
upon the brow.*

*Enchanting form, dark complexion, eyes made
wide.*

*On the lips the flute of nectar; on the chest the
vajrayanti garland.*

*Tiny bells shine at the waist; the sound of anklets
is sweet.*

*Mira's Lord, giver of joy to the saints, Gopal who
is tender to his devotees.*

Here resistance is implicit. To ask Krishna to live in the eyes is to make the body itself a shrine that no palace can lock. Darshan, the exchange of seeing that structures Hindu temple worship, is internalized. The detailed iconography—crown, earrings, tilak, flute, garland, waist-bells—shows a poet trained in the visual theology of Krishna images, the very training a Merta child raised before a Giridhar murti would have received. Beauty is not an ornament added to doctrine. It is the doctrine.

Legacy: From Hagiography to Public Culture

Meerabai's afterlife is longer and better documented than her life. Colonial ethnography and the making of a Hindi canon circulated her as both Rajput heroine and literary classic. Nationalist writers then put her to new work. As Martin (2023) traces, Tagore, Gandhi, and Mahadevi Varma found in her precedents for women's self-respect, nonviolence, and a wider life for the modern Indian woman. Domesticating biographies tried, against the grain of the songs, to make her a better earthly wife. Late-twentieth-century recoveries pulled the other way: Kishwar and Vanita (1989) in Manushi, Mukta's (1994) fieldwork among oppressed-caste singers, and Sangari's (1990) critique together made Mira indispensable to debates on women and religion in South Asia.

In Rajasthan the living culture is concrete: the Meera Temple at Merta's Charbhuj complex, memorials at Chittorgarh, and the Dwarkadhish tradition of her merging with the image. Folk genres such as the khyal Mira Mangal and the oral epic Mira Janma Patri retell her ordeal in registers that expose caste and gender violence more bluntly than courtly hagiography (Martin, 2023). Recorded bhajans and school recitation have made a handful of padas part of a shared North Indian soundscape. The usable scholarly consensus is modest. Meerabai was in all likelihood a historical Rathore woman married into Mewar in the 1510s. The miraculous vita and the enormous padavali are later

communal compositions anchored in that memory (Hawley, 2005; Taft, 2002). What communities needed from her was a way to say that love of God could authorize a woman to leave the script she had been given.

CONCLUSION

To rewrite Meerabai's story as a research article is to accept a double obligation: to the stubbornly thin historical record and to the stubbornly rich tradition that grew around it. The princess of Merta who married Bhoj Raj, survived the disasters of Khanwa's generation, and would not become the kind of widow Mewar required is a plausible historical figure (Taft, 2002). The woman who drank poison laughing, who tore the chunari for a coarse wrap, who declared that Giridhar alone was her husband, and who disappeared into stone at Dwarka is the figure that bhaktas, poets, reformers, and scholars have needed her to be (Martin, 2023; Martinez, 2018). Between those two sentences lies the whole problem of writing saints.

What can be said with confidence is that Meerabai's name marks one of the most consequential female voices in the religious literature of Rajasthan and of North India. The padas attributed to her do not abolish gender; they work through it, using the language of marriage, shame, service, jewelry, and tears to claim a loyalty higher than the kul (Sangari, 1990). They do not abolish social hierarchy; they embarrass it by seating a princess among saints of every rank (Mukta, 1994). They do not replace temple Hinduism; they insist that the temple's god may be met in the eyes, the throat, and the open road. That is a sufficient legacy. It does not require that every later miracle be accepted as reportage, and it does not require that Mira be conscripted as a twenty-first-century feminist avant la lettre. It requires only that her songs continue to be read as they were meant to be heard: aloud, in company, as a wager that love can outlast a court.

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