



The Rebellious Bhakti Tradition: Receptions and Appropriation of Meerabai in the Prominent Sects of Gujarat

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Of the many poets of medieval India, Meerabai is the one who holds the most controversial and prestigious place within the public imagination of India over the centuries. Her songs, popular across the Indian Subcontinent, have moved across linguistic and cultural boundaries easily and people sing them not just in the northern part of India but into the southern part as well. One of the most highly regarded and best-selling bhajans sung by M. S. Subbulakshmi, who is herself, a native of the south. More than ten films have been made till the date based on her hagiographical narratives. Apart from this, Meerabai has been also sung by the classical purists like Kishori Amonkar, and legendary artists like Lata Mangeshkar and Anuradha Paudwal. The important aspect of her popularity among the common masses of India is not just her poetic creations (which is unquestionably of greater significance), but rather as a rebellious female saint poet whose very life becomes the metaphor of non-conformist ideals. Hence, it would be proper to look at her hagiographical properties first following the critical and poetic aspects of her creations.

As far as written document is concerned regarding her poems, the oldest extant manuscript is the one from Dakor said to have the date of 1585 A.D. along with the one gained from Banares around 1670. The Dakor manuscript is the oldest extant manuscript but Rajyaguru notes in his research that this manuscript came down at least after the seventy years of Meerabai's life. This is again very important point. (Rajyaguru: 29) Besides, the compilation is found from the temple which has its association with the Pushtimarg, a sect in which the figure of Meera remains obscured and antagonistic. Hence, there prevails a doubt among the scholars like Parita Mukta, Nancy Martin and John Hawley regarding the honor-ship of these manuscripts. Therefore, it is obvious to have a question regarding her absence within the growing religious compilations associated with different sects from sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. The answers to this question are many. The first reason is that Meera did not associate herself to any sect nor her pads were taken up by the then established or establishing religious sects which happened in the case of Narasinha as well. (Hawley: 141) In fact, there are evidences in the religious literature of the influential Vallabh sampraday¹ of hostility towards Meera.

The story of Krishnadas Adhikari, which appeared in the Chauriasi Vaishnavo ki Varta narrated how Krishnadas visited Meera while he was on his way to Dwarka. While other Vaishnav bhaktas were already gathered there, Krishnadas seemed to be disinclined to stay. Meerabai hence pressed him to take some gold coins back for Shreenathji, but Krishnadas departed in a huff saying that since she was not the disciple of Vallabh Prabhu, he would not do her work. (Shabnam: 96-98) This text is an important collection of famous saints of Pushtimarg. However, here, two aspects are very revealing. The first is the very important custom of Vallabha's sect wherein the word seva² is given new dimension. The word emphasizes on giving everything to the God Krishna by being His mother. This is the central custom of Vallabha's sect. Besides, the songs of Meera, as shall be observed in the later part of this chapter, reveals her contrasting nature to this custom since she assumes the role of Krishna's beloved

¹ A sect which was established by Vallabhacharya during 16th century.

² Literally means service, but here it connotes renouncing everything to Lord.

and wife, hence could rely on Him for everything. Therefore, the story is not supported by the very nature of Meerabai which is to be found in her songs.

In one more story of Purohit Ramdas, appearing in the same text, the attitude of Vallabhites becomes clearer. The story narrated how Ramdas, who was singing a verse composed by his Vallabh Prabhu in front of the Thakurji murti, was asked by Meerabai to sing an alternative devotional song to Krishna. This act of asking made Ramdas angry who in turn replied, "Look, oh bad widow, since you do not believe in Shree Mahaprabhu³ (Vallabhnath), why should I have any reason to listen to your request?" (Shabnam: 96-98)

In these two instances, two things become clear. The first is regarding the popularity of Meerabai during her time and as result of it, the hostility of Pushtimarg towards her. The hostility is so acute that she was subjected to such ill-treatments in their written narratives. The second is regarding the nature of her bhakti which could not find any association with the Pushti sampraday. Then after comes the other prominent sect within the region of Guajrat popularly known as the Swaminarayan⁴ Sect. The founder of this sect used to describe it as Uddhav⁵ sampraday. The sect was established in the early 19th century. In this sect, Meerabai remains almost completely absent. The celebration of the erotic in Meerabai and Krishna as her divine husband differs tremendously from the preaching of Sahajanand Swami. (Williams: 148) Hence, her songs remained outside the discourse of this sect. Besides, the songs sung by the main four poets mentioned in the earlier chapter celebrate Sahajanand Swami more than the Krishna whereas in Meera, the Krishna is the sole object of her devotion. Outside the region of Gujarat, Meerabai appears into Chaitanya sect as well. In the Bhaktamal, an anthology of accounts of the saints, it has been noted that Meerabai met the great theologian Jiva-Goswami in Vrindavan and at times Jiva-Goswami was not willing to see her. Later on, when he learnt that Meerabai was a great devotee of Krishna, he allowed her to meet. But in the poetic creations of Meerabai, there comes no reference to this instance. Moreover, there isn't any other reference available till the date citing the association of Meerabai with this sect. Hence, as a devotee of Krishna, Meerabai stands at a distance from all these sects. Meera found her place and honor during this phase of time within the oral tradition alone. However, the reason behind this isolation is the way of her devotion which is highly singular and distinct by nature. As shall be discussed in the poetical analysis, the songs by her are teemed with the social metaphors and as a result of that, it is obvious for the then prominent sects to avoid her. In Meera, there is not only sakhi-bhav or dasi-bhav, but patni-bhav as well. Though, she was married in worldly sense, she never admitted her marriage as a true bond. In many of her songs, she addressed Krishna as her husband. This is very peculiar about her poems which do not allow much room to the sects mentioned before since the main aim of all these sects was to create a trend of devotees who would obviously belong to the general public. The religious symbols were employed to create a cult of rich mercantile communities for the economic and political purposes. Moreover, the celebration of popular taboos within the songs of Meera would certainly cause a feeling of resentment towards these sects. (Dave: 59) Hence, her isolation and exclusion should not be seen as a surprise. However, with the advent of colonial modernity, there emerged a new literate class within the region of Gujarat who, being trained into Western modes of education, started to look at the medieval bhakti poetry in order to derive a modern sense of belonging and because of her treatment of distinct metaphors in her poetry, Meerabai could not remain away from them.

References

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³ The great Lord.

⁴ A sect founded by Sahajanand Swami widely known as Lord Swaminarayan in Gujarat.

⁵ A character from Bhagavata tradition who becomes synonymous to knowledge centered tradition of attaining salvation.

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