



Gandhi's Mira

Mira was one of Gandhi's favourite symbolic figures. There are scores of references to her in his writings and speeches. Most often, he held her up as a symbol of nonviolent resistance to injustice. Explaining that the doctrine of *satyagraha* "is merely an extension of the rule of domestic life to the political" (CW, Vol. 17 p. 153), he saw noncooperation as *par excellence* the weapon of women, and Mira, in her resistance to her husband's tyranny and her drinking the poison, that is, courageously enduring punishment, as the supreme exemplar of the *satyagrahi* spirit. Making of this a symbolic heroic moment, he drew an analogy between Mira and Socrates, both of whom fearlessly drank poison administered by tyrants but did so without hatred toward the tyrants.

On a couple of occasions, Gandhi stated that Mira's noncooperation with her husband ultimately compelled him to become her disciple. But he frequently referred to Mira's having "forsaken" her husband as a sign of the right to individual choice of a path. Advising Bhai Kotwal, he wrote: "If you wish to do so, free yourself from all personal bonds. Follow the way of I left my friends and kinsmen, and my husband as well' and engage yourself in khadi work and in the service of Harijans, Muslims and drink

addicts." (57:418-419).

He also saw Mira's choice as specifically an example of a wife's assertion of her individuality. Arguing that a husband who had given up meat or foreign cloth had no right to compel his wife to do likewise, Gandhi wrote: "A Hindu husband seems to think that a wife is a chattel. I have heard monster-like husbands referring to the wives as their property. ... Does not the wife have an individuality too? Damayanti had it, Mirabai showed that she too had." (28:105)

Arguing that a wife had the right to undertake national service even against her husband's will, he said: "Mirabai has shown the way." (31:512) In other contexts, Gandhi cited Mira's spiritual attainments and her legendary retort to Jiv Goswami at Vrindavan as evidence of women's innate equality with men.

Gandhi very frequently projected Mira as a symbol of the power of love. The Mira *bhajan* that most frequently recurs in his work is one he learnt at school where she describes herself as bound to god by the slender thread of love. Gandhi interpreted this in a variety of ways, primarily as that which binds humanity together: "love, which in Saint Mirabai's language, is as soft and fragile as a weak thread, but as strong as life itself. It draws men together from thousands of miles..." (63:388), and, again:

*"The Lord has bound me
With the cotton-thread of love,
I am his bonds slave;*

sung Mirabai. And for me, too, the cotton-thread of love that bound me to the community was too strong to break. The voice of the people is the voice of god." (39:177)

Gandhi saw Mira's forsaking the luxuries of royal life not as a sacrifice but as a liberation, remarking that she left the palace and danced in joy. In a striking image, he compared Mira's choice to that of the *satyagrahi*: "Mirabai has sung:

*Prepare not your draught from the twice-bitter neem,
Shunning the sweetness of the sugar and sugarcane;
Give not your love to the glow-worm,
Turning away from the light of sun and moon.*

This saintly lady has told us that anyone who devotes himself entirely to love of God will find everything else bitter like *neem* juice and lustreless like the glowworm's glitter. Likewise, anyone who has had experience of *satyagraha* — soul-force, who has found its spell irresistible, will have no pleasure in petitions and deputations." (9:386)

Gandhi wished the fearless Mira to be seen as a role model by women. About a little girl entrusted to his care by her father, he said: "My own wish is that the girl should grow up to be a Mirabai ..." (18:339) and, commenting on the urgent need for women's education: "We badly need thousands of women who can compare with Mirabai and Rabia Bibi." (7:51)