

Mirabai temple at Chittor

Mirabai in Rajasthan

by Parita Mukta

“Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And the enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”

Walter Benjamin, “Illuminations”

THE legend of Mira, the sixteenth century Rathori princess who took to the life of an itinerant singer, has it that on more than one occasion, she survived attempts on her life by the ruling Sisodiya family of Mewar into which she was married. That Mira, who rejected marriage to the Sisodiya prince and declared her love for Krishna, was able to withstand these threats to her life within her own lifetime is remarkable enough. What is even more remarkable is that the memory of Mira has been kept safe and has continued to be evoked through the centuries of Sisodiya rule, in the midst of repression by the Rajput rulers. There has been a systematic attempt by the Rajput princely family, and more generally the Rajput community in Rajasthan, to blot out the name of Mira within its own social fabric and within the society over which it held power. This was demonstrated to me time and again by the various people I spoke to and questioned in my attempt to reconstruct a social history of Mira.

Bhattnagarji belongs to a family of *killedars* who have been fortkeepers of Chittorgarh from the thirteenth century. Bhattnagarji continues living within the fortress of Chittor, and his experience is an important indicator of the way Mira's name was socially obliterated within the state of Mewar. He now works in the finance department of the collector's *kacheri* in the town of Chittor.

He began by laughing about the irony of discussing the history of Mira within the state office where he was working. He was emphatic that it would not have been permissible to do so while working for the princely state. He stated that no one with any link to the princely state would have dared utter the name of Mira. "No, we were not told not to. We knew not to. The people who gave us *jagirs*, who paid me, remained silent on the history of Mira. I know that if anyone had dared to talk about her, he would have been thrown out of state service. *Sing Mira's bhajans?* How can one sing or hear the *bhajans* of someone whose name is not to be uttered? In earlier times, I myself would not have talked freely about Mira as I am doing to



Women bhajniks in village Chandravads, district Jamnagar, Saurashtra

you now."

Similar to the experience of Bhattnagarji is the experience of Chothuji Bhat, who comes from a family of travelling puppeteers, and who for many years earned his living by travelling and performing. About 15 years ago, he was travelling through Rajasthan, and called a halt at Sisodiya Ka Kheda, a village near Chittorgarh. Chothuji did not then know the social make-up of the area, and, as was his custom, he began singing about Mira, in order to rally a crowd round him to encourage them to gather and view his puppet show. "People round about started shouting that if this is what you want to sing, you'd better leave the village. I was confused till an old man came to me and said, 'You're a poor man, come here to earn your keep. This is a Sisodiya village. Wherever there are Sisodiyas, you must not sing about Mira. They still think that Mira blemished their name.' All this time, some people kept on shouting, that by singing what I had (it was about Mira, I remember, I don't remember, the exact *bhajan*) I had humiliated them. (*Yah hame niche jhukane ki baat hai.*) From that time on, I stopped singing Mira *bhajans* in that region."

It is clear from these two, and other

experiences recounted, that those who were tied in a dependency, in different ways, to the dominant Rajput community, had to tread warily and not evoke the memory of Mira, for fear of losing their livelihood. That men from the dominant Rajput community exercised this power to attempt to suppress the memory of Mira is significant enough. It is also the case that women from within the Rajput communities have expressed a hostility to what Mira stood for.

In a village called Dagla Ka Kheda near Chittorgarh, a group of Bhatti women were incensed when I asked whether one of their daughters was called Mira and whether a girl child would ever be named Mira. The negative answer was given in an outraged tone. Embedded in the name of Mira for the majority of Rajputs even today (though not for the middle class Brahman and Bania communities of today amongst whom the name of Mira is popular in the same way that the name Puja or Arti is) is a woman who was a widow, but who refused the norms governing widowhood, a woman who laid aside the *kul maryada*, and who brought shame on her *kul*. The *kul* (and those with loyalties to that *kul*) have responded by attempting to obliterate her existence.

Mira leaving Chittor, by Kanu Desai, a student at Gujarat Vidyapith, founded by Gandhi. How then has Mira's memory been kept safe and alive in Mewar? And why? It has been retained in a sphere of life over which the rulers could not wield direct power — the sphere of religious expression, of *bhakti* and *bhajan* singing, into which the rulers did not intrude.

These *bhajan* gatherings are composed of women and men from communities with similar social backgrounds. They congregate of an evening, after the day's labour, to participate in a collective *bhajan* sharing under one roof. These gatherings take place on particular occasions — at Ekadashi, regularly in the months of Sravan, Kartik, at the birth of a child, during a period of mourning.

Within these *bhajan* gatherings, it is not only Mira *bhajans* which are sung, of course. But the singing of Mira becomes a political act when it is sung, as it is in Mewar, by the subordinate sections, of peasant and artisan origin, who understand that to sing Mira is to flout ruling Rajput authority. The *bhajniks* of Mewar are aware of the fact that they, and only they, have retained Mira.

Huki Kodra Patel, a 60 year old widow who lived on her own, tilling nine *bighas* of unirrigated land in the village of Pahara near Kherwara, said at a *bhajan* gathering held in her house: "They sing only of their warriors and battles", pointing in the general direction of Udaipur, "We sing Mira." "On the bus to Deolia, a group of Od women, brick kiln workers in Udaipur who were on their way to Pratapgarh to fetch someone recently widowed to her marital home, on being told my work, sang a number of Mira *bhajans* with great intensity. One of them, Partapi Modhu Od, said: "Mirabai made Raidas, a Chamar, her *guru*. Obviously the Rajputs could not tolerate this."

Again and again, the *bhajniks* reiterated that the "Thakurs" would never sing Mira. "They tried to kill her for having brought shame on their name. Why should they sing of her?" Both women and men from the subordinate sections of Mewar



Mira leaving Chittor, by Kanu Desai, a student at Gujarat Vidyapith, founded by Gandhi

— weavers, leather workers, Dangis, Patel, Jats, Dhakars, have collectively, in the singing of Mira *bhajans*, kept her memory alive.

Who will take the leading role in a *bhajan* session, depends on a variety of factors; at the home of Huki Kodra Patel, there were more women than men gathered, with the women very much in the forefront, interjecting comments and discussing the themes of the *bhajans* in the lull between.

Usually, it is older married women or widows who participate with zest. Rarely have I seen unmarried women do so. Sometimes the women are very visible, forming half the gathering, but not taking part in the public singing or in the playing of instruments — *manjira*, *ektara*. The older men would do so.

In a society which does not give much worth to the life of any individual woman, the upholding of Mira over more than 400 years gives us a tradition of hope and challenge in which a woman is remembered to have survived for her own truth in the face of a virulent opposition.

There are four elements to the *bhajans* sung by the peasants and artisans of Mewar, which I can only briefly delineate here, but which I hope to pursue more systematically in a forthcoming work. Firstly, Mira's rejection of the Rana as husband, and her rejection of a life of

riches and her thereafter taking to a life of poverty. This has led to an alignment with her by the poor, who have seen in her action an alignment with their own conditions. Secondly, the ostracism and harsh suffering Mira suffered at the hands of the Rana — the cup of poison and snake sent to destroy her, symbolising the repression she faced — have enabled those who were at the receiving end of the rule by the Ranas of Mewar to identify with her, and articulate through the Mira *bhajans* the immorality (as they see it) of the Ranas' rule. Thirdly, Mira's acceptance of Rohidas as *guru*, her breaking of caste and class boundaries, has made for an alliance between her and the Dalit communities. Fourthly, Mira's choice of a relationship with Krishna, in sharp opposition to the marriage to the Rana, Mira's refusal of the status of widowhood, are all articulated through *bhajans*, which contain strong statements on personal liberties for women. The *bhajniks* of Mewar perceive the Rana of Mira's songs as her husband. They sing some *bhajans* which are not Mira compositions but are cast in a dialogic mode between Mira and other *bhaktas*. One such *bhajan* which upholds the assertion of Mira runs like this:

*There is dust rising up in the distance,
Mirabai, there is dust rising up in the distance.
You are bound to the name of*

Hari.

It is a procession of jogis, Mirabai, it is a procession of jogis. There is a lamp lit to Hari in every home.

It is not a procession of jogis, Mirabai, it is not a procession of jogis. There is a lamp lit to Hari in every home.

It is a marriage party from Chittorgarh which is arriving, Mirabai, it is a marriage party from Chittorgarh arriving. You are bound to the name of Hari.

Lay aside these tattered rags, Mirabai, lay aside these tattered rags. Drape yourself in the garment sent by the Rana.

Drape the garment round your slavegirl, Rana, drape the garment round your slavegirl. These tattered rags are in the name of Hari.

Lay aside your garland of tulsi, Mirabai, lay aside the tulsi garland. Tie on the necklace sent by the Rana.

Tie the necklace round your slavegirl, Ranaji, tie the necklace round your slavegirl. This tulsi garland is in the name of Hari.

Join your left hand with me, Ranaji, join your left hand with me. My right hand is for Hari.

The lord of Dwarka has married me, Ranaji, the lord of Dwarka has married me. I have taken to saffron because of him.

I have found a guru in Rohidas, I have found a guru in Rohidas. I am bound to the name of Hari.

The *bhajan* seems to reconstruct the accepted version of Mira's life, by making her a single woman who rejects marriage altogether, rather than a wife leaving her husband's home, or a widow. Her taunting advice to the Rana to give his gifts to his slavegirl suggests that to accept them



The cardboard cut-out of Mira in the inner sanctuary of the Mira temple at Chittor

would be to accept servitude to him. Her mocking of the wedding ritual by offering him her left hand (one can scarcely imagine a greater insult in a society which deems the left hand dirty and inauspicious) is the ultimate rejection of the Rana as groom, and the ultimate flouting of his authority.

The two oppositional spheres — the total rejection of Mira by the ruling Sisodiya family and the people's upholding of Mira in the midst of Sisodiya rule — began, slowly, to come together in the nineteenth century. It was a contradictory process though, and remains riven with conflict even today.

Colonel James Tod, the British Political Agent of Mewar from March 1818 to June 1822, began the process of the romanticisation of Mira's history. He wrote the *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* in which he glorified dominant Rajput martial values such as honour and chivalry. In the *Annals*, Tod lauds Mira as the "most celebrated princess of her time for beauty and romantic piety." Tod reduced Mira's history to a "romance" and this paved the way for the idealisation of Mira solely as a mystical, romantic *bhakta*,

immersed in a spiritual unity with Krishna, and the dilution of the tensions inherent in her history.

It was due to Tod too, that interest in the fortress of Chittor arose. It was renovated, so that what we see today is a nineteenth century renovation and reconstruction. Within this century arose the myth that the temple in Chittorgarh near the Kumbha Shyama temple, was built for Mira by Rana Kumbha, deemed to be her husband. In this mythification, the Rana, Mira's husband, is supportive of her choice of a relationship with Krishna. This choice is not seen as involving a negation of marriage to the Rana, but as coexisting harmoniously side by side with it.

Thus, Mira, so long reviled by the Sisodiyas, began to be incorporated in their official history, with the challenge contained in her message smoothed out. It was not, however, until 1955 that a cardboard cutout figure of Mira was installed within the temple designated "*Mirabai mandir*." This was done with the official patronage of Lalsinha Shaktawat, a Sisodiya Rajput from village Jagat at a stage of his political career, when he was an MLA, from 1952 to 1956. Thus Mira was reinstated in the bland cardboard shape of a smiling devotee in the very fortress that she had sworn never to set foot in again.

This reinstatement of Mira took place after Mira had become a national symbol, mainly through the importance placed on her by Gandhi through his political speeches and writings during the anticolonial struggle, in which he depicted Mira as a "paramount *satyagrahi*." Those Rajputs rapidly losing their power, and showing a willingness to change according to the political climate, could ill afford to (neither did they have the power to) deny Mira as strongly as they had done earlier. The history of Mewar became linked to two very different symbols—Rana Pratap, and Bai Mira. Despite this official recognition granted to Mira, as I have shown earlier, the Raj-puts at the village level to this day continue to feel threatened by what Mira stood for.

Within the religious expression of the

upper caste middle class, Mira is a recent phenomenon, of a depth of no more than 60 years or so. Gandhi, particularly in Gujarat, but more widely in the cultural revivalism that accompanied the political Struggle for independence, was crucial in elevating the image of Mira as the chaste lover and ideal wife who quietly bore the torture inflicted on her by her husband and who at last won him over to her truth by her acts of "satyagraha": "...Mirabai...forsook her husband ...and lived a life of absolute love. Her husband at last became her devotee." (*Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Navajivan Trust, Ahmedabad, 1966, Vol. 13, p. 442)



Painting by Ravishankar Rawal shows a Mira in white. The relationship Mira lived out and broke away from her family for, is here reduced to the household worship of an image.

"Ecstasy" (left) and "Dedication" (right) by Kanu Desai. Both insidiously feed into the notion of woman as seductive in her chastity.



"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 her husband's will. Both Prahlad and Mirabai practised satyagraha... neither...had any ill will towards their persecutors...Mirabai [is regarded as] a model wife." (Ibid, Vol. 17, 152-153)

In the sphere of music, Vishnu Digambar Paluskar did much to integrate the singing of *bhajans* within the classical tradition and gave to the Mira *bhakti* a new form and a new social base. Paluskar's pupil, Narayan Moresvar Khare, went to reside at Gandhi's *ashram* and he edited

the *Ashram Bhajnavali* containing a number of Mira *bhajans*. In this *Bhajnavali*, one of the most popular and critical of the Mira *bhajans*, still sung throughout Gujarat and Saurashtra, has been edited in such a way as to remove the challenge it poses to the institutions of marriage and of widowhood. The still popular and extant original *bhajan* is as follows:

"I have become attached to your face, beloved Mohan, I have become attached to your face.

I saw your face and the whole world appeared sour to me. My mind, though, was illuminated. I have become attached to your face.

The householder's happiness is an ephemeral one. ONE weds and becomes a widow. Why should I go to his house,

beloved Mohan? I have become attached to your face.

I married my loved one and achieved an indestructible relationship. I annihilated the fear of widowhood, beloved Mohan. I have become attached to your face,

Mirabai is blessed. My one hope rests in you. Oh, I am fortunate beloved Mohan. I have become attached to your face."

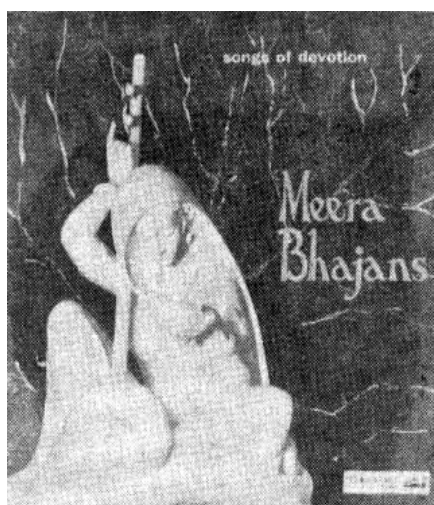
In Gujarati, the *bhajan* is extremely powerful: "*parni ne randavu pachhu...*" and "*randavano bhay taadiyo re, Mohan pyara...*" hit at the very raw nerve of widowhood. The expurgated version in the



Ashram Bhajnavali sounds nothing like this, and it is possible that it was so expurgated because the term used for widowhood is the same as the term for prostitution ("*randavu*") Be that as it may, the edited version involves not merely deletion of words, but obliteration of the critique of the institution of widowhood. I give below the translation contained in the "*Ashram Bhajnavali*", (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 44, pp. 449-450.): "O dear Lord, I love Thy face, as soon as I saw Thy face, the world became useless to me and my mind became detached from it. The happiness that the world gives is like a mirage, one should move about deeming it of no account. Mirabai says: Blessed Lord, my only hope is in Thee and I consider my-self fortunate (in that I have seen Thee face to face.) 11-11-1930."

Gandhi, who “read a profound meaning in widowhood”, and whose message to widows was: “Look upon your widowhood as sacred and live a life worthy of it,” (*Collected Works*, Vol. 16, 1919-1920 Navajivan, pages 233 and 234) could not have accepted a total rejection of the state of widowhood.

In the sphere of the visual arts, there has been a similar attempt made to portray Mira in a way which appeals to the aspirations and the morality of the rising middle classes. Ravishankar Rawal and Kami Desai were two artists who did this most prominently in Gujarat. Ravishankar Rawal’s philosophy was to inculcate through art an appreciation of his interpretation of the moral values embodied in Gandhian ethics. Rawal’s philosophy, translated into paintings, depicted woman as seductive through her chastity, appealing through her purity. Within this hypocritical portrayal, he also blended the image of Mira. Kanu Desai painted a folio on Gandhi — and, separately, on Mira. Kanu Desai gives us an image of Mira which feeds into



Cover of an LP record shows Mira in widows’ white, denying her the saffron. She is subsumed into a Bhakti conducted by widows in the family.

distorted conceptions of woman as supplicant, woman as dancer, woman as pliable lover.

The expression given to Mira by the women and men of the subordinate sections of society against the forces of upper class and caste slander and repression is now under a new threat. It is being eroded in the face of the onslaught of a technologically orchestrated religiosity, in the ubiquitous sale of prerecorded cassettes, and in the steady imposition of a monolithic religious ideology propagated by television and the state. The looser, less hierarchical, less centralised and more egalitarian expression within which Mira has survived all these centuries needs to be actively supported and nurtured if we are to retain an integral part of our past which can enable us to shape and evolve a future encompassing the experiences of all those who continue to suffer degradation, and to whom Mira holds a particular meaning. It is incumbent upon us all to fan the spark of hope in the past—and to keep the dead safe from the enemy.