

MIRABAI-AN EPITOME OF EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Successful women share some common traits like self-confidence, ability to harness their own thoughts, a great deal of personal intention and undaunted will-power. Subjugation is a threat to any individual entity. When cultural mores are constraints to them and when they are marginalized, by exercising their will they try to voice out themselves. Taking a positive stance of their own destinies they move passionately ahead with heroic grace. One such personality who moved ahead with such passion is Mirabai who was a staunch devotee of Lord Krishna. By choosing the path of devotion she stood ahead of time during 16th century itself. Though she hailed from a royal family she had to undergo many a setbacks in life due to her devoutness for it had caused resentment in her extended family. She never wavered but kept her devoutness kindling at the cost of all mundane things. For, she knew that it was the divine love that alone can help transcend all mundane things and reach the Divine. Mira has expressed what she is innately, regardless of what others said about her. Her authentic self is devotion in what she believed in and cared about. Mira could individuate herself from all shackles and external influences through her sheer determination. If the term empowerment meant self-strength, self-power, own choice, life of dignity in accordance with one's values, independence, decision making, capability, etc., Mirabai is an Empowered women of her times. Since the sixteenth century she has been the torch bearer to all the women folk who were bereft of empowerment. Mira's life and her compositions can be taken as an inspiration for they are relevant to all ages. The present paper is a study of the Mirabai's life where several instances have been drawn out to show her devoutness and undaunted courage that shall instill inspiration and leave an indelible impression in the youth and empower them to confront any tribulations in life.

‘Empowerment’ of women has been the buzz word in today’s world for the emancipation of women and to bring about changes in their socio-economic condition. Every nation feels that no society can progress until women, a constituent of society, lag behind. But, patriarchy is a prominent feature of hegemonic ideology and women have always been relegated to suppression in the patriarchal society. The roles of men and women in society are mostly determined socially than biologically.

The precepts of patriarchal social order do not allow any man or woman to perceive beyond the established norms. But a gradual widening of education in society has stimulated thirst for the long-dormant emancipation among women. As lack of freedom was perceived as discriminatory and agonizing by some women, there were instinctual rebellions to represent themselves.

Mirabai, a prominent spiritual exemplar of 16th century, is one such instinctive rebellion who adhered to her chosen path of devotion to Lord Krishna. Woman carving out her personal space to be autonomous is not astounding in modern times. But Mira in 16th century has chosen a path infringing the then prevailing patriarchal social order and social norms and has set an example to other women.

Mirabai’s name resonates as a spiritual paradigm of 16th century and is known for her single-minded devotion towards Lord Krishna. By the power of her extraordinary faith, she proved herself to be an empowered woman of her times. Through her soul-renderings Mirabai has boldly expressed her own way, defined her faith and her commitment.

The devotional hymns or padas or song verses attributed to Mirabai appear to be 200 in total. But it is difficult to confirm how many hymns are rendered by Mira herself, as her padas were neither penned by her nor she had disciples to pen them. Her padas are said to be in Gujarati, Marwar and Rajasthani language – the regional languages of the place she lived in.

Mira’s songs are alive more through oral tradition as ‘-----her padas are full of lyrical quality and spontaneous emotions, found a place in the heart of the common man’ (Nilsson 18). Nancy Martin in her Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion opines that Mirabai’s songs have been ‘preserved in the fluid realm of oral tradition’(Mirabai-1).

Mirabai’s padas are translated into English by many authors of Indian and foreign origin, like Shriprakash Kurl, Usha S.Nilsson, Krishna P.Bahadur, Andrew Schwelling, Robert Bly to mention a few. Her padas not only overflow with her deep devotion to her Lord but also portrays her personality.

Mirabai was born at the time which would be called the Golden Age of Hindi poetry and her contemporaries were noted poets like Kabir, Surdas, Malik Mohammad, Jayasi and Tulsi Das. In his Songs of Saints of India, John Stratton Hawley, a critic on Mira states that Mira is ‘-- --the only one of her gender to have earned a place on the honor roll of North India Bhakti Saints, she exerts a fascination that none of her male counterparts can match’(Mirabai e notes).

Mirabai’s dedication towards Lord Krishna is said to have begun at a very early age when she was enamoured by the idol of Lord Krishna which was given by wandering mendicant. Her interest and attraction towards Lord Krishna, has matured with her age. Mira was married to the Rajput crown prince of Mewar, Bhoj Raj. According to Rajput customs, a Rajputani has to observe purdah, which is considered to be the most characteristic aspect of a Rajput woman’s identity, and live a secluded life in the fort. Social reservedness is considered to be the sine qua non of Rajput women. They were not allowed to go out in public places even to places of

worship. To guard the sexual virtue of Rajput women, even for occasional brief travel, special arrangements were made with their faces veiled from the spectacle of strangers.

Mira did not comply with any of these rigid social customs. But, Mira as a married woman was in compliance with her socially prescribed duties for a married woman. As Simone de Beauvoir opines in her *The Second Sex*, every human being is a distinct individual; Mirabai never compromised with anything at the cost of her self-respect and her convictions. Mira's initial confrontation with her family began when she disobeyed her mother-in-law's command to offer prayers to their family deity Durga. Mira asserted that she could by no means pray any other deity excepting Lord Krishna. Though her attitude had enraged her in-laws, Mira did not concede. Going against the wishes of extended family was considered a sin in the society. But, every person has his/ her own likes and dislikes and wishes to freely exercise his/her will and, when a person is deemed as an 'object' his/her 'will' is influenced by numerous factors; moreover, it is absolutely an unjust treatment as it refrains him/her from exercising free will; which is a negation of 'self'. Though women do not complain openly, this refutation will surely have a psychological impact in the case of women, as it is the 'subjugation of women.' Though not a maxim, however, generally

Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiment. All men.....desire to have in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one, not a slave merely, but a favourite. They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds.(Mill 19)

So, women should be strong in her mental characteristics and should realize that by 'becoming slave of her own feelings, she is easily subjugated.....' (Wollstonecraft 99) and to liberate themselves, they should be led by their own impulses.

Mira's conviction to live a life in accordance with her own convictions, her devoutness towards Krishna and her refusal to worship their family deity- Durga added fuel to the fire in the new family. Mira continued her prayers in a temple which was built for her by her husband. Mira seemed to lose consciousness of the physical world while singing devotional songs and in a sense of jubilation used to dance in public places. She was defensive of her deeds and through her pada's she could candidly voice out her feelings and emotions in liberating herself from the existing social customs, like in the following lines: 'I am true to my Lord;/Why should I feel abashed, O comrade, now that I have danced in public' (Bihari 45) and also said: 'In the presence of Giridhara will dance./Him shall I please by dancing, and His lovers I shall /solicit;' (Bihari 45) As stated by Baba,

Devotional singing (bhajan) is the process of singing that originates in the heart, not from the lips or the tongue. It is the expression of the joyous thrill that wells up from the heart when the Glory of God is remembered. It is the spontaneous manifestation of inner ecstasy. No attention is paid to the blame or praise that others may give. It does not seek the admiration or the appreciation of the listeners.(Satya Sai Baba's quotation on Bhajans)

Devotion or Bhakti to God is not only an intense love for God but is also an emotion of the mind. It is not a rationale but a feeling and a stance of heart but not intellect. Love for God makes the devotees lose their Self. Mira's staunch faith and perseverance to Giridhara Gopal gave her strength. She is a loyal servant of the Lord. Mira's non-conformity with the Rajput conventions is considered incongruous; she is nonchalant with the people of the world. She

never cared any scandals against her. Her fervour and unbending nature for Krishna were abhorrence to the rulers of Mewar.

Mirabai stood as a silent rebellion in flouting the conventions of the royal household. Her meetings and spiritual discussions with ascetics and entertaining the common folk to join her in singing hymns have not only infuriated the family but also spread fake rumours and slanderous remarks on her. But Mira remained apathetic to their distorted talks. Mira was well aware of this and sang: 'I took to keeping hermit' company/Lost conventional modesty' (Nillson 13) and 'My mother-in-law says/I destroyed the family honour' (Nillson 49) but 'I have ceased to care/For people's opinion' (Nillson 13)

Mira, unable to bear with the attitude of her royal household, left the fortress secretly, but later, on the request of her reconciled husband, she returned. Women in the name of conventions were tied up with the bondage of superstitions and customs and have to adhere to them till their last breath. Mira was among the earliest Indian women to violate the principles of the then society and her class in refusing to follow the convention of Sati, for her own reasons, on the death of her husband.

Mirabai is a woman ahead of her times. With her strength of character she proved to be fearless, defiant and a rebel who could gracefully abandon her upper class family to pursue a life of a devout sincerely with impervious spirit. She has endured the suffering for choosing the path of devotion. Mira was brave and courageous in defying the existing order of social customs and in the renunciation of domesticity to lead a life of an ascetic. Mirabai-a name synonymous with devotion to Lord Giridhar Gopal, has left an indelible impression and has been immortalized in the hearts of common man.

If the term empowerment means self-strength, self-power, own choice, life of dignity in accordance with one's values, independence, own decision making, capability, etc., Mirabai, by fighting against deeply rooted prejudices, could prove to be a truly empowered women of her times with her innate strength. Her deep devotion is the only strength with which she could fight all the adversities in life. Mirabai stood as an empowered woman by mustering up courage through all the trials and tribulations of life and was anchored on an unshakable resolve i.e. path of devotion to her Lord with her 'indomitable will,' which is keystone in any human achievement.

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