

Mirabai, Gandhi and *Satyagraha*¹

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Abstract

The paper seeks to understand why Gandhi found it imperative to evoke the image of Mirabai, who was considered a *Kulnashi* and rejected by her own community, to strengthen a nationalist movement. It explores why and how the nationalist myth of Mira appropriated a tamer version of the poet-saint than certain other historical and literary sources suggest. While Gandhi adopted important and unique strategies of protest from Mira, the paper is interested in how he largely decontextualized and diluted her politics with respect to gender and caste.

Keywords: Gandhi, Mira, Ambedkar, bhakti, satyagraha, nationalist movement, Indian women, “ethical weapon”, civil disobedience, devotional poetry, Krishna, symbolism, untouchability and caste.

Mirabai, a sixteenth-century poet-saint, was considered a *Kulnashi*² in her own time for the radical life she lived. Bhakti dharma seemed to have an irreconcilable clash with *Stri dharma*.³ Mira defiantly chose to leave her family, marriage and pursue her “ecstatic devotion to Krishna” (Hawley 1). Several attempts were made to excise the memory of Mira from official Rajput history. Yet Mira’s songs are widely celebrated. She emerged as an iconic figure generating a plethora of myths about her and a whole body of poetry composed by others in her name. She even inspired certain methods deployed in the integration of the Indian nation during the anti-colonial movement. The paper seeks to understand why Gandhi found it imperative to evoke the image of Mirabai, who was rejected by her own community, to strengthen a nationalist movement.

The Bhakti movement of medieval times and the nationalist movement led by Gandhi are crucial junctures in Indian women’s history. Each witnessed greater participation of women in areas that were not traditionally considered their own. But both are, at the same time, guilty of reducing women to their “inherent” submissive nature. Because of their “essential” purity and spirit of dedication they were considered more suitable for the moral battle that religion and nationalism sought to fight in their own ways. A.K. Ramanujan points out that in the Bhakti realm, “being male, like other kinds of privilege, is an obstacle in spiritual experience, in attaining true inwardness” (10). Men had to undergo a longer rite of passage to graduate as a practitioner of Bhakti and whereas women were readily regarded as far more prepared for devotion than men. Women were accustomed to subordination and suffering, and only had to replace their earthly lord with a celestial one now.

Parita Mukta argues that Gandhi appropriated the rebellious Mira into a pious, socially acceptable, *pativrata*⁴ woman who endured asceticism (and inequality in the family/society) to win the devotion of her husband. No source is unmediated—whether official or not. A lot of knowledge about Mirabai has been acquired from hagiographic sources. When Mira’s bhajans entered popular culture and evoked scholarly curiosity, there were attempts to dish out tamer and more palatable versions of her story. The *Amarchitrakatha* bears evidence of this purifying agenda. It may not be wrong to propose that Gandhi took a philosophical interest in Mira’s life and significantly derived strategies of protest from it, but he largely decontextualized her politics with respect to gender and caste. Gandhi emulated Mira’s renunciation of privileges at a superficial level, but could not pursue the act to its radical climax.

Mukta gathers Gandhi’s lectures and letters that suggest that he catalogued a list of *satyagrahis*⁵ who inspired him to adopt this method of resistance and acknowledged their steady contribution to the fight for human freedom and equality. This provided his endeavours a place in an enduring legacy that proved powerful and also gave the nationalist movement its broader context. Gandhi is often, rather naively, labelled an anti-modernist. Akeel Bilgrami defends the radicalism of Gandhi’s thoughts, saying that there is no way one can be an anti-colonialist and not be an anti-modernist because anti-colonialism and modernism are two irreconcilable outlooks in that colonialism can be argued as an outgrowth of the Western modernist project. It is important to remember that modernity can also unfold within the specificities of regional cultures, as Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar edited *Alternative Modernities* (2001) would suggest. Gandhi’s civil disobedience is an alternative model of modernity. To him, Mira becomes a

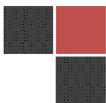
resourceful myth to salvage and an “ethical weapon” to wield against colonial institutions instead of resorting to a violent or judicial process (Mukta 185). American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, as Kathryn VanSpanckeren rightly points out, influenced Gandhi’s notion of civil disobedience. Thoreau’s essay, “Civil Disobedience” (1849), underscores “the moral necessity for the just individual to disobey unjust laws” (30). Gandhi read Thoreau’s philosophy and Mira’s bhajans together and translated them into context-specific political action.

Besides being opposed to the idea of violence, Gandhi was also sceptical of the concept of Law. He found the need to adopt extra-constitutional methods to handle the historical present. His methods shocked everyone because the only kind of extra-constitutional means of revolt that the colonisers knew of was armed rebellion. Gandhi was careful to discourage that. An armed rebellion against a militarily advanced country cannot be sustained. Bilgrami’s words are worth-quoting again:

Gandhi chose his version of non-violent civil disobedience instead of the constitutional demands of the Congress leadership because he thought that the Indian people should not merely ask the British to leave their soil. It was important that they should do so by means that were not dependent [on] and derivative of ideas and institutions that the British had imposed on them. Otherwise, even if the British left, the Indian populations would remain a subject people (104).

Nonviolence and meditation on truth would challenge the enemy with love. The Gujarati meaning of the word “satyagraha” means “truth force” (Mukta 184). The English translation of the word, “holding onto truth,” does not do justice to the agency that is present in this truly avant-garde method of resistance. In fact, agency in both Gandhi’s and Mira’s protests is often interrogated rather unfairly. Mira’s bhajans are extraordinary in their articulation of a truth that she experiences through her imagination. This marks a paradigm shift in devotional poetry. Her poetry does not deify a deity from a distance, but presents an intimate and equal relationship with a lover-God. She does not look for exemplary stories distanced from her regular life, but simply expresses her familiar world and inner desires in her poetry. She bravely turns to her imagination to conjure up a wedding with Krishna.

The fictionality of the dreams implodes and the dreams explode to become the reality she inhabits. She now firmly believes that she is married to Krishna. “Mira seems to reject the view,” as Hawley observes, “that life with Krishna must be an illicit liaison and to posit marriage instead” (127). Hence she does not fit into the trope of the traditional *virahani*, who only pines for the male lover/deity in separation. Mira demands his presence. She also defines Krishna’s identity as her lover and husband. This is clear from the salutation in almost all her songs that say, “Mira’s Lord, clever Mountain Lifter” or “Mira’s been granted her mountain-lifting Lord” (in Hawley and Juergensmeyer 136, 137).⁶ She is not afraid to call Krishna a *yogi* and herself a companion *yogini*. Traditionally, neither was Krishna regarded as a *yogi* nor were women allowed to consider themselves *yoginis*.⁷ One should not miss the eclectic nature of Mira’s imagery, drawn mostly with reference to her poetic self-reality: the image of a *yogini* does not get along with the earlier image of a deviant woman – but Mira’s poetics

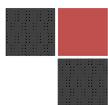


no less consists in a politics of collapsing binaries. A lot has been said about the right of literature to constitute a reality of its own that does not require veracity. In her bhajans Mira rescues herself from external impositions to believe in the authenticity of her inner voice now turned into holy words by their own right. Conviction disarms one's oppressors most effectively, especially when it takes on an unexpected, dramatic turn – as did Gandhi's non-violent politics. Mira says: "Let us go to a realm beyond going/ Where death is afraid to go.../To strengthen an inner regimen/To focus on the dark form of the Lord" (140).

The Mira that Gandhi invoked and the myth that he constructed about her, hardly ever accommodated her deviance from traditional gender norms. Gandhi curated a gallery of legendary women whose examples of endurance and chastity he imposed upon ordinary living women of his time. It is not surprising that all of these were myths historicised and tailored to suit a Brahminical morality and bolster the image of woman as pure and sacrificing. Gandhi consolidated and strengthened the nationalist movement around the image of elevated and infallible women that would unify an otherwise fragmented nation or a nation in the making. Gandhi had some concrete contributions towards restoring dignity and justice to the lives of women. But much of his iconography around women and his professed faith in the feminine model of struggle were dominated by an instrumental and strategic interest in assimilating one section of the population into the movement and in adopting some methods of resistance without acknowledging their contextual relevance.

The model of ideal femininity that emerged during the nationalist movement continues to plague contemporary gender politics. A mention in the passing of the feminist collective Pinjra Tod (Break the Prison) might not be irrelevant. Fighting patriarchal rules in college and university hostels for women, its members declare: "We won't Mother India!" Gandhi attempted to endow women with a false sense of agency, implying that they would magically succeed in a battle against patriarchy by clinging onto a (fraught) notion of dignity. He encouraged an awakening in women as long as they were committed to the health of a patriarchal nation. Instead of condemning men for the oppression of women, he glorified the image of a morally incorruptible woman. Gandhi is known to have frequently recollected the mythical narrative of Draupadi's impassioned prayer to Krishna to protect her during her disrobement in public. Gandhi is convinced that she was able to protect herself because of her determination and chastity. The scene of Krishna extending the length of her sari endlessly is but an exteriorization of the virtuous woman's self-protection. The values of determination and chastity are, however, of no relevance in contexts of sexual harassment. If anything, connecting them by any route to violence against women only justifies atrocities against women who are social non-conformists or deviants by patriarchal standards of sexual morality.

Mira's Krishna, on the other hand, is an embodiment of her boldest desires and very much unlike the Krishna that Gandhi portrayed in the narrative of Draupadi. In Mira's poetry, Krishna is the cause of her public defacement. Bhakti women entertained a scandalous union with Krishna. It culminated in a rebellious rejection of family, a microcosm of the social structure oppressive to women. Mira consciously indulges in the act of transgression with Krishna as her consort. Nabha Das's description of Mira in *Bhaktamal* foregrounds her lack of concern for conformity and modesty:



Modesty in public, and chains of family life—
Mira shed both for the Lifter of Mountains. (51)

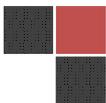
The exploited are often taught to endure. A woman's "natural" capacity for endurance was taught to the countrymen by Gandhi. He advocated a "certain kind of feminine courage in preference to other kinds of strength and heroism" (Kishwar 272). Endurance proved effective in the nationalist struggle at a specific moment because it was a paradigm shift in the methodology and mechanisms of resistance and subverted assumptions about the third world as barbaric and incapable of thought. Gandhi's hypothesis was supported by many non-violent but powerful acts of alternative rebellion. But the imposition of endurance on women would prove detrimental for the feminist future of India. It not only legitimized patriarchy, but provided a justification for it. Gandhi never appeared cognizant of the fact that Mira, from whom he claims to have largely inherited the ethos of *satyagraha*, directed her strength at overthrowing patriarchy. For all his sincere approach to self-determination through *satyagraha*, Gandhi used a political strategy devised by women to the advantage of an "upper" caste and upper class male-dominated society.

Gandhi also celebrated a fraught relationship between the participation of women in the freedom struggle and the inclusion of the Dalits and Advasis in it. Women were expected to provide a "humanizing force" to the movement at a crucial stage when he needed to assimilate marginalized groups into the mainstream of Indian nationalism (Kishwar 289). He attempted to eradicate caste by utilizing the "essentially female" virtues of renunciation and penance instead of initiating a structural displacement of caste or holding accountable the biggest beneficiaries of privileges—caste Hindu men (Kishwar 283).

Gandhi's nationalist politics was also dominated by a prudish repression of female sexuality. Even though he advocated a wholesale rejection of sexuality, the whole moral onus fell on women. He often considered women to be temptresses. Incidents have been reported when he had got women cut their hair to punish men for their attraction. Mirabehn, Gandhi's disciple, was also made to cut her hair in accordance with the austere practices of his ashram. However, the real Mira (as in her poetry) is anything but austere. She wants to wear a crown of gold and a blazing red sari. S. Balaram maintains that Gandhi, who was efficient at using popular symbolism in the nationalist movement, became a demi-god himself. In popular imagination Gandhi is often imagined as Krishna.

According to the great epic *Mahabharata*, Krishna spread the doctrine of love while eventually effecting the great war between the Kauravas and Pandavas. Similarly, Gandhi adopted the doctrine of nonviolence while actually leading the historical Indian fight for independence from Britain (Balaram 70).

Gandhi, therefore, may be said to have arrogated Mira as a mythical devotee to himself. He projected a cleansed relationship between Krishna and Mira assuming it to be a relationship between himself and his devotee. And he cautiously regulated that myth in order to protect his image as Krishna, one could say. But Mira's relationship with Krishna was as far a shot from it as it can be. Mira assertively claims to have witnessed



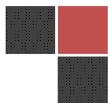
Krishna disarmed and vulnerable in his nakedness. She speaks of her Lord from her intimate experiences. “Hey, I have seen Hari naked, all naked!,” she cries (39).

Satyagraha expanded the base of the freedom movement. Gandhi’s Mira had remarkable success in appealing to the large masses of people from the non-creamy layers of society. Mukta argues that Mira’s songs were appreciated and accepted by many “subordinated groups in the society such as—leather workers, women, itinerant singers” -- because they “articulated a vision of better relationships” and offered a “powerful hope seeking realization” (Mukta 182). Mira’s poem on the Bhil woman explodes casteist and other purity prejudices. Gandhi moved along the line and attempted eradication of the caste system in his own time. Even the method that Mira employs in that poem to destroy social hierarchy, is developed by Gandhi by introducing the inter-dining practice.

Bhakti is commonly regarded as a movement against institutionally-organised Hinduism. But it has also been examined as an assimilative strategy of Hinduism to sustain itself against Buddhism that was fast becoming popular because of its non-hierarchical structure. Gandhi possibly tapped into the mythical resource of Mira and her popularity among backward communities that he wanted to integrate into the movement, for other reasons as well: to use the figure to salvage (mainstream) Hinduism on its wane. Gandhi saw untouchability as a perversion of Hinduism, whereas B.R. Ambedkar believed it to be intrinsic to the majoritarian religion of the land. Gandhi’s religious attitude has been described as “practical” by Manisha Barua (24), who goes on to add that he did not shy away from criticizing the war hungry myths of Hindu gods. Yet he found it impossible to reject Hinduism for its unfair caste structure. Gandhi could not go past a tokenistic acceptance of the Dalits and Adivasis into Indian politics, while Ambedkar was more interested in social reforms for the marginalized communities and matters of equal access to public resources and power relations.

In a Mira song the Bhil woman offers Krishna a fruit “contaminated” by her bite and touch. In Krishna’s acceptance of the fruit, the concept of pollution is challenged. Louis Dumont argues that the Indian caste system is founded upon the structuralist binary of purity and pollution. Any attempt to overthrow the system is compromised because the act of displacement is also predicated on the binary opposition and dependent on it. Mira’s poem has a Brahminical god who performs a gesture of acceptance and Gandhi interprets Mira’s caste subversion within the ambit of Hinduism and finds it useful. “The Hindu Revival Movement or Neo-Hinduism which emerged in the first decade of the present [twentieth] century is also part of the campaign to bring so-called social groups under the spiritual and social umbrella of Hinduism” (Patel 191). Hinduization, as Arjun Patel points out, is not just a religious but also a political process. It was an imposition. Gandhi was particularly concerned about saving Hinduism from attack since the Adivasis were inclined towards a conversion to Christianity.

Gandhi’s relationship with the Dalit and Adivasi identity movements is not uncomplicated just as the Bhakti movement had an indeterminate connection with the marginalised. Despite the relevance of his integrationist politics in his times, Gandhi’s concern for the avarnas⁸ frequently appeared to lack sincerity and a mere attempt to assimilate them into the independence movement. They were asked to compromise their



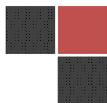
specific interests for the “greater good”. Yet the political philosophy of *satyagraha* was widely relevant in the acts of resistance that India’s myriad marginalized communities adopted. Both B.R. Ambedkar and Motilal Tejawat led the Dalit and Adivasi groups to articulate and assert their identities against savarnas through the method of *satyagraha*. It is possible that Gandhi was such a central figure in Indian politics then that it was impossible to be heard without referring to him or his ways.

Motilal Tejawat, expecting Gandhi’s support, started a movement for the Bhils in 1922. Ambedkar launched *satyagraha* at Mahad in 1927 for access to a public water tank. In 1930-1, the Adivasis contributed to the Civil Disobedience Movement by disobeying forest laws. Gandhi withdrew support from these movements or refused to endorse them because they were either too confrontational to him or he imagined that his ideas had not been fully grasped by the members of the marginalized communities. His lack of support to these movements eventually led to their failure. David Hardiman is not far from truth as he writes, “Despite the obvious success of his movement among many Adivasis, Gandhi did not devote any great intellectual or political energy to them and their problems” (146).

Gandhi tried to convince Verrier Elwin, a Christian missionary, that converting the Adivasis to Christianity was wrong because they were not born into it. But Elwin retorted that the “Gandhians who were working among the Adivasis were involved in a conversion of a more subtle sort, namely that of inculcating their own cultural values” (Hardiman 148). Gandhi was not prepared to treat the Adivasis as a separate oppressed people. His engagement with their specific problems began in fits and starts when he was forced to consider the possibility that they might develop separatist sentiments (Hardiman 150). Gandhi imagined a more equal and democratized sharing of space among communities within Hinduism, and an appropriation of Mira’s Bhakti poetry supported that dream, however fraught it was with self-contradictions.

Notes:

- ¹ Lit., “holding onto truth.” Historically, a method of resistance devised by Gandhi.
- ² Destroyer of a clan.
- ³ Duties of a wife.
- ⁴ A virtuous wife devoted to her husband.
- ⁵ Practitioners of *satyagraha*.
- ⁶ All citations from Mira’s poems are from Hawley and Juergensmeyer.
- ⁷ An ascetic, mystical person. *Yogi* (masculine gender); *Yogini* (feminine).
- ⁸ People in the Hindu caste hierarchy, who do not belong to the four varnas.



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