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# Hindu Feminism

Part I:  
The Emancipation of Mirabai



By  
Edmund Weber

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\* Picture glued at a small fret-work from Brindaban, U.P., India

## Introduction

The situation of women in India today seems to be ambiguous. On one side many unborn girls are aborted after illegal scanning and on the other side women are leading politicians like the president of India or chief-ministers of single states.

However, the appearances are deceiving.

Even if newborn girls are not killed there are illegal and systematic killing of unborn girls and a high degree of mortality among young girls.

This anti-female behavior has caused a tremendous lack of women in India. The statistics of the sex ratio (men:women) are as follows: India 1971 1000:930; 1991 1000:927; 2001: 1000:933 (which is a deficit of 35 Mio. women). Considering the richest states of India sc. Punjab and Haryana the statistics get worse: 2001 Punjab 1000:874 and Haryana 1000:861!

The sex ratio of children at the age of 0 and 6 years gives the following shocking result:

India 1991 - 1000:945; 2001 - 1000:927; Punjab 1991 – 1000:875; 2001 – 1000:793.<sup>1</sup>

That these statistics are an explosive matter is seen even in India. Besides academic researches even Indian mass media are engaged with that horrible issue.

INDIA TOGETHER gives full details of the sex ratio under the shocking head: *Sex ratio: the hidden horrors*.<sup>2</sup>

Even the Indian mass paper THE HINDU denounces the disastrous sex ratio in an editorial under the title: *No girls, we're Indian*. The newspaper continues: "India may be known for many things but it now has the distinction of being known as the nation that likes to ensure that girls are never born."<sup>3</sup> Any judgment about the treating of women in India could not be more crushing.

2008 the UNESCO called the world's attention to the horrendous situation of Indian women by several academic studies. The study of Malkit Kaur reveals the dramatic situation of Indian women particularly in the richest states of India.

Considering the fact the power of a society today doesn't depend on the muscles but on intelligence only, and women dispose of more than 50% of that potential, we can conclude that India will lose the international competition on the long run.

In contrast to India and other more masculinist societies the Western countries have realized very early, because of that advantage, they have to intensify the emancipation of women: misogyny doesn't pay anymore.

Because of the wide spread misogynist mentality in India the most popular discourse of emancipation likes to refer to models of religious history. In families where a rational discourse about female emancipation is taboo such religio-historical models - lacking seemingly any immediate relevance for the present situation - are used as means of indirect communication. However, emotionally these models presented in comics, TV, cinemas, music-CDs, DVDs, posters, books, booklets, dramas etc. have an immediate effect. They prepare – we may hope – the basement for radical politics of women's liberation in India in the next decades.

### The emancipative experiences of Mirabai

One of these emancipative models of Indian history is the freedom's fight of Mirabai. Since some decades particularly her emancipative poems are used as means of the indirect discourse, and because of their striking emotional power, they have become very influential.

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<sup>1</sup> Malkit Kaur: *Missing Daughters: Socio-economic and Cultural Dynamics of Adverse Sex Ratio in Punjab*. In: *Another Side of India. Gender, Culture and Development*. Brenda Gael McSweeney, Editor. Foreword by Gita Sen. Published in [Paris] 2008 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (s. u. Anm. 4)

<sup>2</sup> Pavan Nair: *Sex ratio: the hidden horrors*. In: INDIA TOGETHER 2004; [www.indiatogether.org/2004/apr/hlt-cratio.htm](http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/apr/hlt-cratio.htm)

<sup>3</sup> *No girls, we're Indian*. In: THE HINDU. Online edition of India's National Newspaper, Sunday, Aug 29, 2004

Mirabai lived at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Born as a daughter of a maharaja of the Rathor dynasty ruling a small kingdom in northern Rajasthan she was married to a son of the Sisodia dynasty ruling a kingdom in south Rajasthan. The couple had no children. Her husband was killed in action. Although a widow she did not suffer *suttee*.

Worshipping only Krishna she was persecuted by her in-laws. Nevertheless, she ignored the *purdah*<sup>4</sup> and instead wandered about. By singing and dancing she was proclaiming her experiences with Lord Krishna to the people of all castes and classes.

By order of the Rajputs, the military nobility which she belonged to, her name and poems were not allowed to be mentioned for centuries. However, bards and women of the untouchable castes sang her songs secretly and preserved them in this way.<sup>5</sup>

Her songs are well-known all over India today. They have been published in Hindi editions<sup>6</sup>, and translated into French<sup>7</sup>, English<sup>8</sup>, and German<sup>9</sup>. The Indian cinema has produced two very famous devotional Mirabai-films: The musical screen *Meera* (1945/1947) where the Indian nightingale M.S. Subbulakshmi (1916-2004) sang the songs.<sup>10</sup> Another famous one, *Meera* (1979), has been directed by Sampooran Singh Gulzar; composer and player of the music was the celebrated Indian musician, Ravi Shankar, and Mirabai was played by Hema Malini. The most beautiful Indian comic has been dedicated to Mirabai.<sup>11</sup> Dilip Kumar Roy wrote a Mirabai drama.<sup>12</sup> The well-known Swiss producer of perfumes, Chopard, named one of his products after Mirabai.<sup>13</sup> Statues of Mirabai one can find everywhere in the world.

The famous Indian writer Pritish Nandy, when he was editor of The Illustrated Weekly of India and Publishing Director of the Times of India Group, translated her poems into English out of personal reasons. In the preface of his booklet he confessed: "It was in the autumn of seventyfour, when I was hurt and lonely, savaged by sundark and suicide that I came across Mirabai. In her songs I found voice for my griefs that I recognized to be my very own."<sup>14</sup> Many Indian and Western female researchers have started to look into her life and work. And Indian women are more and more regarding Mirabai as one of their pioneers.

We have to keep hold of the fact that she - although a saint now - has been a real person. She was a historical woman who had won the personal emancipation from the andro-centered society of her time.

<sup>4</sup> A custom that women have to stay at home all the time.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Parita Mukta Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai. Delhi 1994.

<sup>6</sup> E.g.: Caturvedī, Ācārya Parashurām(a), Mīrāṅbāī kī padāvalī, (many editions), Prayāg. Mira Sangita: Mira Ke 78 Padom Ka Svarankana by Mirabai, Lakshminarayana Garga, Mahatma Gandhi Antarashtriyā Hindi Vīsvavidyālaya. Hathras, India 2000. Mīram: Mukti Ki Sadhika by Mirabai. Ed. by Mira Kanta. Nai Dilli [New Delhi] 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Chants mystiques de Mirabai. Traduit et commenté par Nicole Balbir. Paris: Belles Lettres – UNESCO (décembre 1979). Monde Indien 6.

<sup>8</sup> E.g.: Pritish Nandy translates THE SONGS OF MIRABAI. New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann Publishers (India), [1975]. A.S. Alston: The Devotional Poems of Mirabai. Delhi etc. 1980. Mira Bai and Her Padas. Tr. into English verse with Introduction by Krishna P. Bahadur. New Delhi 1998. Schelling, Andrew: For Love of the Dark One: Songs of Mirabai, Prescott, Arizona 1998. Levi, Louise Landes: Sweet On My Lips: The Love Poems of Mirabai. New York 1997. Bly, Robert / Hirshfield, Jane, Mīrābāī: Ecstatic Poems, Boston, Massachusetts 2004. V.K. Subramanian: Mystic Songs of Meera. New Delhi 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Mirabai – Liebesnārrin. Die Verse der indischen Dichterin und Mystikerin. Aus dem Rajasthani zum ersten Male ins Deutsche übertargen von Shubhra Parashar. Kelkheim [Germany] 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Biography of M. S. Subbulakshmi. In: [www.rmaf.org.ph/Awardees/Biography/BiographySubbulakshmiMon.htm](http://www.rmaf.org.ph/Awardees/Biography/BiographySubbulakshmiMon.htm). 2006 wurde dieser Filmklassiker als Tanzfilm in DVD neu herausgebracht: M.S. Subbulakshmi's 'Meera' now available in dance form. In: THE HINDU. Online edition of India's National Newspaper Tuesday, Dec 12, 2006. ePaper.

<sup>11</sup> Amar Chitra Katha. No. 36. Editor: Anant Pai. Art Work: Yusuf Lien. Bombay n.d.

<sup>12</sup> Chaitanya and Mira. Pondicherry 1979.

<sup>13</sup> [www.fragrantica.com/perfume/Chopard/Mira-Bai-352.html](http://www.fragrantica.com/perfume/Chopard/Mira-Bai-352.html). Or: the German women's journal *Brigitte* 21, 30th of September 1998, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Pritish Nandy translates THE SONGS OF MIRABAI. New Delhi : Arnold-Heinemann Publishers (India), [1975].

Worshipping Krishna only Mirabai understood that kind of religious exclusivism as her personal right. However, exactly by that she got in trouble with the Rajput nobility. As a wife she had to worship the deity of the family of her in-laws, in this case Kali, the Goddess of the warriors. Mirabai, however, decisively refused that obligation and acknowledged only Krishna as her exclusive God.

Such a religious behavior was indeed a revolutionary move. A woman deciding by herself about her religion, a house-wife refusing to serve and respect the family deity, a princess praising Krishna in the public together with people of the lowest classes, threatened the whole order of the nobility and of the other high castes. In other words: Mirabai dared to live as a woman of self-determination and self-responsibility.

For her hard-won liberty she renounced her noble status and the acknowledgement of the Rajput caste.

Tying herself to the mythical male God Krishna Mirabai mentally emancipated herself from the masculinist ideology which determined the social fate of women and practically from the culture and the laws which favored men only.

It is indeed paradoxical that Mirabai could resist the rule of an andro-centered society by devoting not to a goddess but to a male god.

However, Mirabai made a frustrating experience. Her beloved Krishna did not prove to be a fantasized fulfiller of her traditional female desires at all. Although it was her utmost desire, he was not ready sharing with her the happiness of conjugal life. He evaded her when she tried to cling to him, and to submit him to her desires.

For Krishna's sake she lost her honor as a noblewoman and for his sake she had to manage and to eke out a miserable existence. For, he was a yogi, a footloose and fancy-free man, restlessly traveling throughout the world. Therefore she could not bind him to herself she confessed full of grief and bitterness.

Nevertheless maintaining her love to Krishna she on one side was set free from the repressive female role of the andro-centered society and on the other side from taking refuge in the dependency of a male god.

Denying Mirabai the fulfillment of her traditional female desires and driving her to despair Krishna forces her to emancipate herself from all external and internal enslavements: She alone has to take care of her existence and nobody else – not even her beloved God. If Krishna refuses to please Mirabai he does it because he does not want to tie her to him. Accepting that cruel treatment she got the liberty of self-determination, her emancipation, against her own traditional aspirations.

Mirabai's way of life was a utopian one for the masses of Indian women of her time. However, today it has become a realistic model. The mental Mirabai-potential penetrates the brains of Indian women more and more. Even well-known Indian men like Pritish Nandy have started to worship Mirabai. No wonder that Hema Malini, who played the role of Mirabai in S.S. Gulzar's renowned film *Meera* (1979), was nominated as a member of the Upper House of the Indian Parliament.

### Emancipative Poetry of Mirabai

Some verses of her poems shall be presented demonstrating Mirabai's specific kind of emancipation.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of persecution, contempt and miseries Mirabai did not give up her unreserved love for Krishna. In this way she could successfully oppose the nobility and their misogynist culture, and preserve her self-determined and fulfilling way of life as a Krishna-devotee.

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<sup>15</sup> The poems are quoted from A.S. Alston: *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai*. Delhi etc. 1980.

No. 18

1 My love is reserved for Giridhara Gopal  
 2 And for no-one else.  
 3 O ye saints and holy men,  
 4 I have seen the world and its ways.  
 5 I have left brothers and relatives  
 6 And all I possessed.  
 7 Dispensing with worldly shame,  
 8 I came to sit with the holy men.  
 9 I felt joy in the company of the devotees,  
 10 On beholding the world I wept.  
 11 I planted the creeper of love  
 12 And watered it with my tears.  
 13 I churned the curds  
 14 And drew forth the ghee:  
 15 The butter-milk I rejected.  
 18 Mira's love has set in deeply,  
 19 She accepts whatever comes.

Mirabai's extraordinary religious exclusivism causes her to leave her traditional life as a noble lady and leads her to the other Krishna devotees. Her reason of radical decision of exclusive Krishna-worship she illustrated with comparative pictures. According to these pictures she made the best choice for her life. Accepting whatever happens Mirabai, however, is ready to bear all consequences of her exclusivism.

No. 24

1 I have turned my back on this palace  
 2 Once and for all.  
 3 And the bolt is drawn.  
 8 I care neither of Ganges nor Jamuna,  
 9 I am making my way to the sea.  
 12 I will not trouble with officials,  
 13 I will go direct to the court.  
 16 I trade in diamonds  
 17 And do not care for gold and silver.  
 20 Who would forsake a cup of nectar  
 21 To drink brackish water?

Mirabai's decision to leave her noble status is irrevocable. Reason is that she wants not second-hand life but a nectarian one.

This nectarian life, her unconditional love for Krishna, crowds Mirabai out of the repressive anti-female culture which ties the women to the love of their husbands. Krishna indirectly forces Mirabai to manage her own way of life. He forces her even if it is painful because of her still traditional idea that the meaning of life of a woman absolutely depends on a husband or male lover.

No. 123

I sent letters to my Beloved,  
 The dear Krishna.  
 But he sends no message of reply,  
 Purposely preserving silence.  
 I sweep His path in readiness  
 And gaze and gaze  
 Till my eyes turn blood-shot.  
 I have no peace by night or day,  
 My heart is fit to break.  
 O my master, You have been my companion

*In former births.  
When will you come?*

Mirabai's Lord she is waiting for does not come although she is looking for him all the time. The old desires for dependence of an almighty and loving protector are still determining her emotions, therefore she says I "gaze and gaze" but she feels such a protector will never come. Mirabai wants answers and messages from her beloved Lord. However he refuses to give her revelations, rewards, commands or orders for her life. He keeps silent and absent. Therefore Mirabai has to live by her own.

Krishna's permanent staying away from her gives her an implicit message: her fantasy needing a male caretaker – he may be a human or a divine one – was all over so that the choice she had was nothing else but freedom.

*No. 54*

*To love a Jogi brings pain.  
He speaks sweet words  
When you are with him  
But then he forgets you and goes.  
Sister, He snaps the ties of love  
As you might pluck a sprig of jasmine.  
Says Mira: My Lord  
Without Thy sight my heart grieves sorely.*

Full of desperation she denounces her Beloved:

*To fall in love with a Jogi  
Is to court pain.  
I loved, but it has brought me no joy,  
My sister.  
The Jogi befriends no one.  
Until I meet Thee again,  
I shall have no rest, day or night.  
Never again in this world  
Have I beheld beauty like Thine.  
Mira said: My Lord, when shall we meet?  
Great will be the joy of that meeting.*

From her traditional andro-centered standpoint Mirabai criticizes Krishna that he has attracted and fascinated her "with sweet words" so that she became full of love for him. He, however, disregards all her desires leaving her and letting her alone. Captivated in her traditional thinking she denounces him as an irresponsible lover who forgets her love, ye snaps the ties of love arbitrary. This agonizing experience continues in Mirabai's life, yet hoping for the fulfillment of her desires all the time.

But despite these horrible pains caused by her desires and hopes Mirabai was not able to leave her Lord. Reason was his attractive beauty; a beauty she never beheld in this world again. Krishna's irresistible beauty means the attraction of free existence which he stands for. Having become conscious of this beautiful freedom Mirabai can abandon it nevermore whatever pain it might bring.

Mirabai's laments that a yogi befriends no one show her internal conflict: her chosen and beloved God is not a servant of her illusionary and authoritarian desires of a life arranged and protected by a man but forces her to take over responsibility for her own existence.

## Concluding Remarks

Women have been trained to submit to male supremacy since thousands of years. Therefore it got deeply rooted in their conscience. The divine rulers of their conscience they had to worship mostly demanded their submission not only to the male human beings but to the Divine, too. That divinely controlled female conscience made the women believing male supremacy is not only God given but also they have to take refuge to the almighty Divine in case human males are not ready to give shelter to them.

Mirabai's internal experience was just the opposite: On the one side she refused the protection of human lords, and on the other side her divine ruler of her conscience was completely unrelated to her traditional idea of God. By his attraction Krishna not only dragged her from the ant-women society of the Rajputs but by acting like a yogi he blocked her to take refuge in a divine protector.

Although a yogi Krishna was still acknowledged by Mirabai as her Lord. But this decision created a paradoxical lordship of Krishna: In order to serve him Mirabai had to become a self-determined, free person, and had therefore to accept the agony caused by non-fulfillment of her desire for divine protection.

That acknowledgement was indeed a revolutionary break-through in her traditional self-perception. In this way she got a powerful internal court of self-determination. Her mythically shaped superego, Krishna, forced her to transcend her still andro-centered mentality and to live a free and independent life.

Detaching her love for Krishna from her old imposed submissive desires Mirabai created an unconditional and autonomous basic idea of her existence. The beauty of this self-created freedom from heteronomous internal dependencies was so overwhelming that in Mirabai's consciousness normative conditions for the radical change of her external behavior grew up so that she could realize individual freedom in her non-mythical and very misogynous outside world.

Her experience of female freedom was still utopian for the masses of the women of her day and age. Today it has become irresistibly attractive for female consciousness even if there are still many powerful kinds of female self-repression and masculinist violence.<sup>16</sup>

## Literature

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[www.rmaf.org.ph/Awardees/Biography/BiographySubbulakshmiMon.htm](http://www.rmaf.org.ph/Awardees/Biography/BiographySubbulakshmiMon.htm)
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8. *M.S. Subbulakshmi's 'Meera' now available in dance form*. In: THE HINDU Online edition of India's National Newspaper Tuesday, Dec 12, 2006. ePaper.

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<sup>16</sup> Reducing Mirabai to a fool of love or an erotic poetess one oppresses her matter of concern once more. Living in a time of great changes of human consciousness she actively took part in the development of female liberation. The lyricism of her songs means that Mirabai experienced the deepest level of human consciousness which is called the Holy. And such an overwhelming experience can be adequately expressed through lyrical poems only.