



The Rana in Mirabai's poetry and musical adaptation

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Mirabai, a medieval bhakti poet wrote poems on the Rana¹—a dark otherwise anonymous being, known by his title rather than any epithet. This genre of poems is unlike her emotional and sentimental poetry. Her mainstream poems closer to the love lyric focus on narrating the love in union and separation. The pining voice in the poems is that of a love lorn *virahini*² longing to meet her beloved. The Rana poems in stark contrast are about her rejection of medieval patriarchy and courtly life.

The Mirabai canon usually includes her poems in *madhurya bhava*, the theme of conjugal love and *srigara rasa* or erotic desire. Her poems linked to the Rana are often seen as transgressive and threatening to the Rajput pride. Her poems are still not allowed to be sung in certain regions of Mewar. The Rajputs knew themselves as Kshatriya, as warriors in the caste hierarchy that borrows its ideological legitimation from *The Manusmriti*.³ The Rajputized versions of Mira depict her as a pious wife, a *Virangana*⁴, a brave and heroic woman, who followed the *pativrata* ideal.

The Rana poems are also about the politics of medieval times, feudalism, the empire's hold over ordinary mortals. Considering that the Sisodiyas of Rajasthan came to control Mewar and the entire Rajputana, their might depended on the princely kingdoms and the centrality of the Rana as the King. The fact that Mirabai's poems written in medieval Rajasthan are still being perceived as socially disturbing points to their political contexts.

¹Rana is the title given to the king of a princely state.

²A woman in grief separated from her beloved.

³*The Manusmriti* or laws of Manu. The publication is variously dated from second century BCE to third century CE. Translated in 1776 by Sir William Jones.

⁴ Lindsey Harlan refers to the *virangana* and *pativrata* models where Mirabai came to be located.

The Rana-centric poems are based on the king, the ruler of the kingdom also on the supremacy of power structures backed by religion he came to represent. He came to symbolize all worldly power and authority. The Rana was the Rajput figurehead, and Mira got linked to him through marriage, and subsequent familial relationships. She was as part of political alliance, married to Bhojraj heir apparent to the throne of Mewar. He was son of Rana Sangha, the great patriarch who wanted to bridge gaps politically between Sisodiyas and Rathores through such marital alliances. Folk narratives as in *Mira Janam Patri*⁵, her nativity song and hagiographic narrative, describe the Rana as oppressive and brutal to Mirabai especially after the death of her husband. *Mira Janam Patri* is composed as epic song to be performed to honour Mirabai's birth and traces major event in her life. While bestowing other worldly glory on her, they narrate the harsh treatment she received from her sister-in-law Udabai and the Rana as her two brother-in-laws.

The other Ranas (as all potential successors to the Rana were given that title) wanted Mirabai to live a life of princess not to mingle with saints and ascetics. They debarred her from meeting mendicants, mingling with them, singing and dancing in temples. Rana Rattan Singh and Rana Vikramjit became her oppressors after Rana Sangha left the throne. Colonel Todd's⁶ accounts of the Rajputs and various Rana in Rajputana denotes the mighty force they had and how they held all through political power and feudal social hierarchies. They used class and caste divisions to control the

⁵*Mira Janam Patri* gives alternate account of Mira's life story. They are rendered in a mode to praise her as a deity.

⁶James, Todd. *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*. London: OUP, 1920..165.



populace. Marriage with a Rajput princess such as Mirabai was a great social privilege. The King or Rana stood outside the feudal structure. The Rajput in these system of hierarchies to Freitag was the “perennial patient (and sometimes victim) of the despotic king who stood outside it. The despot was Mill’s prince, the instrument of the Brahmanical caste system.” Parita Mukta describes the Rana’s authority as the yoking of brotherhood fealty and land for “continuity of an ideal notion of living in service” to a power structure.⁷

The Rajput social structure centred on the Rana, thrived on hyper masculinity and seemingly benevolent paternalism. The Rajput identity being linked to both chivalry and blood lust, in protecting honour of women and subjugating enemies. According to Todd, “The Rajput delights in blood, his offering to god of battle are sanguinary, blood and wine. The cup (kharpara) of libation is the human skull...emblematic of the deity he worships.”⁸ He adds how the Rajput worshipped his horse, his sword, and the sun.

Folk songs were also sung in praise of the Rana. The populace looked to the Rana as incarnation of a deity. While the Rana looked to Eklingji as Godhead they considered themselves as caretakers in service to him. They did not accept title of king for that reason. Rana meant an official obedient to a higher authority. The folk songs sung to the Rana were eulogies, songs sung in praise. A bridal song “Pyra laga sa sumariya Rana pyara lage se” the “groom Rana is adorable is adorable” suggests the honour it was to be married to the Rana.

Mirabai’s poems on the Rana far from eulogizing his chivalry and valour ridicule him. Her poems on the Rana whose identity is never mentioned or rather concealed becomes the silent listener in her poems in the form of dramatic monologues. The Rana is the silent other to the speaking voice that pours out full wrath on the king, not just a husband. The poems are therefore, in a feminine voice that rejects the patriarchal authority of the Rana. She spurns him as both the ruler and her husband. She looks to Krishna not as alternative power rather worships him in his transcendental aspect higher than worldly rulers.

The poems on Rana, taken from the oral tradition call for the opening of the Mira canon. The

poems are never seen as central to Mira’s bhakti as protest. The poems are popular among the tribals, peasantry and working classes as they touch a common chord. Thus, as a genre the poems belong to realism and are different from her romantic poetry. They are Rabelaisian⁹ in their laughter and their use of folk idiom focuses on coarseness of the tangible physical body. The language of the poem hereunder uses loud words—“bad mouthing”, “low-minded”, and stark phrase like, “burn in fire pots” closer to folk aesthetics unlike the restraint in her bhakti poems and *madhurya bhava* in love poetry.

The Rana genre of poems continue to challenge the cultural and religious foundations of the Rajput state till date. Thus, Mira’s padas in Parita Mukta’s comprehensive reading belongs to oral culture, sung among lower caste/class communities of Rajasthan by bhajniks-- local groups of women singers in Mewar, Saurashtra and though royals in Sisodiya bloodline might forbid performance of her songs, they perform fearlessly. Singing Mirabai’s bhajan and poems is banned in Mewar for “it is dangerous to take her name or sing her songs.”¹⁰ Another local says, “This is a Sisodiya village. Wherever there are Sisodiyas, you must not sing about Mira. They still think that Mira blemished their name.”¹¹ The conflict between Mira and the Rana (different names who succeeded Rana Sangha to the throne) was a political battle, a Manichean struggle between forces of darkness and cruelty versus light and wisdom.

The Rana in popular Mira poems plays a villain. He is humourous and caricatured. The Rana was sovereign central to a power structure based on mutual loyalties. According to Todd, he is the mainspring of the system—the active power to set and keep in motion all those discordant materials; if he relax, each part separates, and moves in a narrow sphere of its own.”¹² The authority wielded by the Rana was such that even his “architect, painter, physician, bard, genealogist, herald, and all the generation of the foster-brothers” were gifted land and offices of position.¹³

The Rana poems question his imperial authority and consider him source of all social distortions. While not explicitly advocating social justice and freedom for women, lower castes and

⁷Parita Mukta. 59-62.

⁸ Todd .82 He refers to the Shiva worship by the Rajputs through ritualistic blood sacrifice.

⁹Rabelais. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

¹⁰ Mukta, “Mirabai in Rajasthan” in Manushi. 95.

¹¹Ibid., 174.

¹² Todd.

¹³ Ibid., 165.



classes, her lashing out at Rana's ideological control, and her renouncing palace life/courtly culture, points to her class affinities. Her poem "Ab na rahogi tori hatki" states how she no longer wishes to be controlled by Rana's whims:

*Ranaji, I'm slave no longer
to your stubborn will.
Saints' company I love.
Shame of woman-behind-veil,
has disappeared.
I left, Merta, my maternal home
I left your "morals"
I smashed your "high" values.
Wise master illumined me,
showing me inside of my heart.
I'll snap fingers now, and dance in ecstasy...
O Rana, I do not want your forts,
your large palaces.
I've thrown my silks away.
Mad Mira roams everywhere,
her stray locks unloosened.¹⁴*

The poem makes the anger and resentment in the narrator's inner feelings abundantly clear. There is rejection of his absolute power for what is inside the heart. She refuses to obey the ruler of Mewar. She does that aware of her gender as "the woman-behind-veil". She also embraces the simple path of dancing in ecstasy rather than be entrapped in forts and palaces. Her refusal to be part of the courtly culture meant for royal women, be "mad" and wear "stray locks unloosened" reveals her silent resistance to those in power.

The musical adaptation of the Rana poems must vocalize similar anger and fury in songs as in the poems. Mirabai in popular culture is depicted the oppressed woman who was sent a cup full of poison and a serpent in a basket, she drank the poison and began to dance. Her poem "pag ghungroo bandh" punctuates the dramatic moment of drinking the poison and dancing ecstatically. *Saguna* aspects of Mira's bhakti and stock images related to it make it impossible for her poems to be heard and the anti-monarchic sentiment understood as a cultural critique not merely a personal vendetta. Her worship of idol of Krishna becomes the main theme of her social and personal life. Mira's poems adapted as television serial and in songs limit the depiction of Mirabai as a Hindu saint. The renditions of Mira's poems in desi style by Manginyar folk artists are different. They focus on the ideological duel

between the Rana and Mira in their outspoken songs.

The songs in the T.V serial Meera are most commonplace. They depict Mira as a saintly person immersed in the idol of Krishna. She stays riveted to the idol, singing songs to it, and holding it for strength. However, the real choice is the tricky path that leads to Krishna and the other to the Rana. The serial on Imagine TV is bourgeois construction of Mira's devotion and contains her in a few domestic images. The title song denotes her otherworldliness and uses the word "dewani" to suggest her ecstatic state closer to perceived madness. The Rana in these songs is part of a court that judges Mirabai dressed in her traditional ochre sari holding ektara. The songs thus become conservative version of her poems in the Rana genre. They lack the revolutionary fervor of her poems. The court depicts women in their Rajasthani attires, as part of Meera's extended family, looking at her astounded. The focus is on her praying and petitioning to Krishna rather than her conflict with the Rana's mighty force that becomes central to most folk narratives in music.

In Robert Bly's¹⁵ translations her interest in courtly affairs becomes apparent. As in "Near the Throne" in which she mentions her association with the king himself and not any lower officials. The King here is Krishna way higher than the enclosed world the Rana has created around him:

I'm associated now with the King's court; it must
Have been some work in a previous life...
Subordinate persons are not enough; I'll talk to the
Chief
Wily courtiers are not for me; I'll go to the
Throne.¹⁶

In "To My Brother-in-Law Rana" she subverts the entire dominion and authority of the Rana when she says, "I don't like your strange, strange world, Rana/There are no holy men in it, and the people are trash."¹⁷

This poem in desi style different than the margaaesthetics becomes a powerful outcry in a

¹⁵Bly, Robert and Jane Hirshfield. trans. *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.

¹⁶Bly 34

¹⁷Bly 17

¹⁴Translation mine



musical rendition sung by Prakash Mali. The desi style is to do with human affairs, realistic view of flesh and blood reality, and human relationships. The song becomes a spiritual discourse based on the key lines and words in the original poem. The use of the word “kuro” that is rubbish to define the world Rana has created with feudal hierarchies and Rajput pride based on imagined descent linked to Gods and from solar and lunar dynasties, destroys it utterly. In his song “Rana rang ruro” Bly’s “strange, strange world” is the kingdom of Rana where all are charlatans and deceivers.

Really Ranaji

Ranaji mahane ya badnami lage meethi
(Chaturvedi, 33)

Really Ranaji, I find your bad mouthing,
quite sweet.

You see,
some shall blame,
some shall defame,
but, I’ll walk now topsy-turvy—
turning back to your world,
I’ll walk, wayward.

I find people’s minds
constricted like narrow lanes,
that’s why I turned rebel;
turning my back to them.

I listened to wisdom,
in company of saints,
so, now I know, you see
I know, real wrong-doers.

Mira’s Girdhar,
let all low-minded people,
burn in cinders!

In this poem the topsy turvy walk translation of her line “chaal chalungi apoothi” means wayward and different. As a woman she turns against all narrow boundaries that tried to enclose her. The feisty persona of the narrator of these poems comes out in the rendition of a similar verse in bhajan “Ranaji me to Govinda Ka Gun Gasya”¹⁸ however, the rebellious mood of the original Rana poems resists the simplicity of form. The bhajan unlike conventional renditions becomes a complaint and a petition ostensibly addressed to the Rana is in fact meant for Krishna.. The song in raga Mand follows Mira’s poems piecemeal. The song uses lines from various poems to show Rana as an unholy man and religious Mirabai sings devotional songs to cross the

¹⁸ “Ranaji” musical rendition in mand, private recording on YouTube

ocean of delusion, *bhavsagar*. Given this the song is one of defiance, and a quiet subaltern resistance.

Parita Mukta¹⁹ in her study of bhajans sung by bhajaniks focuses on the collective co-authorship. The bhajans in contrast to popular renditions are based on the Rana in particular. They are improvised, there are folk spin offs and many radical versions. The text of the bhajans are free moving sung by the oppressed, mainly the tribals and peasantry. The narrative is structured around the Rana and the protagonist, a woman is being oppressed. They identify with Mira (usually the woman being tormented) as a subaltern like the people living on the margins of society. The texts of the poems rewritten this way are against all types of class and caste domination by the privileged elite. The sadness of the verses is similar to the Blues²⁰, songs sung by Afro-American slaves on the plantations. The lines and phrases in these performances are short crisp and critical of feudal hierarchies.

Mira bhajan sung by popular artists, in recent times often loose touch with folk aesthetics. In contrast, popular Mira bhajan singers cater to the needs of the middle class market, rendering lugubrious bhajans. The Rana themed songs were meant to dismantle the feudal structure based on hierarchies. In such a singing, the common folk know regeneration and can negotiate their own grief. Hence, the watered down and mellow versions of the Rana genre of poems take away from their political contexts.

In more recent times Barmer Boys²¹ on YouTube recording of a Canada folk festival captures the resistance to societal oppression in Mirabai’s songs in their gypsy folk style. She wants to wear “bhagwa” or ochre to be uplifted from the control of Rana and his state machinery. The song “Hui Ranaji me to bhagwa” or “I became saffron Ranaji” is about surrendering to the Spirit fully. Among her popular bhajans, this one stands out due to the note of social resistance. Opposition to patriarchal rule of marriage and widowhood is the

¹⁹ Parita, Mukta. *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai*. Delhi: OUP, 1994.59-62.

²⁰ Mukta sees the similarity between the folk spin offs of Mira’s poems and the blues.

²¹ Barmer Boys among other popular Rajasthan based musical groups like Morchang and Roots of Pushkar, draw singers from the Manginyar, Bhil and other tribal communities.



theme of this genre of poems. The Barmer boys belonging to Manginyar Sufi Muslim community from Rajasthan, sing the Rana songs with a gusto and zeal conveying the spirit of freedom the song embody. In that performative space, with drums and timbrels they display, they translate the Rana poems not as ordinary bhajans rather fierce announcement of independence from totalising structures and monarchy linked to absolutism.

In another of her Rana poems, Mirabai uses the word “ruthyo” meaning sulking for the king. He is again caricatured as the fallen prince who rules a country that is “kuro” or trash.

Let Sisodiyo Sulk²²
Sisodiyo Rothyo
Let Sisodiyo sulk,
what harm can he do to me?
I'll praise Govinda,
not any random king, O Mother.
When Rana sulks, his whole country looks after
What if my Hari sulks, O Mother
where shall I go, Mother?
I'll not follow worldly codes of conduct!
I'll beat, my fearless drum, O Mother.
Ship of Rama's holy Name
gets ready to sail,
I'll embark it, O Mother
to swim across,
the ocean of existence.

Her Rana poem becomes a quiet upturning of the Rajput pride that Todd praises. Her poems in the genre are about the universal despair the presence of the Rana causes. In “No one's happy” the immense sadness of the subjects of the King is central to the narrative. That sadness like Kierkegaardian²³ fear and trembling points to the metaphysical dimensions of the state of ordinary people.

No one's happy²⁴
Koi Na Detha Sukhiya
There's no one happy here,
really, I see no one happy here.
Sad and sorrowful—
this whole wide world.
Kings sad, subjects sad
Jogi sad, worldly ones sad—
Sad all denizens
of the sea of existence--

²²Swaroop, Sec 2, 33. Translation mine.

²³ Soren, Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*.

²⁴Swaroop, Sec 9, 86. Translation mine.

Birds sad, wind sad, sad fishes in water.
Moon looks sad, sun sad
sad infinite twinkling stars.
Mira says, Lord Girdhar,
worshippers of Hari
stay happy, eternally.

Thus, Mirabai's texts as travelling texts challenge Rajput patriarchy and religious orthodoxy. The Rana genre of poems being critical of rigidities of gender/caste/class, of Vaishnavism and Shakta worship are reformist, might propagate nirguni philosophy of renunciation inspired from teachings of Raidas, or Nathpanthis also Rawaliyas (jogis) of Rajasthan. This constitutes the alternative Mira canon.

Mirabai in the biographical/hagiographical accounts and her Rana poems, resist absolute despotism of Rana. The Rana poems question his imperial authority, consider him source of all social distortions. While not explicitly advocating social justice and freedom for women, lower castes and classes, her lashing out at Rana's ideological control, and her renouncing palace life/courtly culture, points to her class affinities. Her poem “Ab na rahogi tori hatki” states how she no longer wishes to be controlled by Rana's whims: “*Ranaji, I'm slave no longer*”.

His explicating/translating “Rana” in the epithet “King of the House of Sisodiya” provides the historical context to the narrative elevating it from a mere personal rejoinder:

Sister,
*If the King of the House of Sisodiya rages
What can he do?
I shall continue to sing the glories of Govind.
If the King becomes angry
He may keep his kingdom, and welcome;
But if Hari becomes angry
I shall lose lustre like a withering flower.
I do not observe the rules of worldly decorum.
Fearlessly, Sister will I beat the drum...²⁵*

In Alston's “Opposition” translation of “Barji Re Mha Syam Bina Na Raha”²⁶ the Rana emerges as a forbiddener who tries to restrain Mira's bhakti and curtail her body and mind. The narrator's voice is sharp, direct and outspoken thus bettering the

²⁵ Alston. 35 .48.

²⁶ Chaturvedi, *Mirabai Ki Padavali*.



original. Particularly striking are the lines: “He can take my body and mind,/As He already has my head”,

*Though He is forbidden to me,
I cannot do without Shyam.
I will keep far away from the world
And enjoy the company of holy men
And the bliss of Hari.
He can take my body and mind,
As He already has my head...*²⁷

Hermann Goetz²⁸ locates Mirabai in midst of court politics, historical events and palace intrigues. Mirabai is not merely a transcendental spiritual being but rather focused target of family battles, political machinations of the successive Ranas. Her mingling with sadhu-sant or religious mendicants being problematic for Ranas, Rattan Singh and Vikramajit in particular. Mainly because they were suspicious of mendicants whom they considered as spies of the state in disguise: secret messengers and conspirators.

Vikramajit gave orders for decapitation of Mira Bai around Fifteen thirty two²⁹. She continued to be perceived as a threat as she refused to bow down to the authority of the monarch. As Goetz points out, “Mira had developed into a revolutionary, not by attacking the social order and official religion, but by ignoring them, and appealing, in the name of her religion of the heart, directly to the lower classes and the women.”³⁰

Another popular version of her Rana songs is the one addressed to the Mewari Rana thought to be her brother-in-law

Rapt At Hari’s Feet³¹

Hari ke charano me chitta lagyyo
Hear, hear, O Mewara Rana,
rapt at Hari’s feet my heart dwells!
Rana once, threw a pebble at me
hear, O hear Mewara Rana!
Pebble became saligram, O Rana.
Rana sent cupful poison,
poison became immortal amrita,
hear, O hear Mewara Rana!
Rana sent snake in casket, hidden
snake became a nine-stringed necklace,

²⁷ Alston. 29.46.

²⁸ Goetz .25.

²⁹ Ibid., 25.

³⁰ Ibid., .25.

³¹ Swaroop, Section 2, 15. Translation mine.

hear, o hear Mewara Rana!
Mira’s Girdhar, is her Lord
I meditate on His feet.
Do you hear that now,
O Mewara Rana?

The poem built around series of oppositions depicts the hostility Mirabai invoked. The poem “Rapt at Hari’s Feet” undercuts Mewara Rana’s violent acts by miraculous escapes. The hitting with a pebble, sending snake in a casket and finally attempt to poison her are defeated. The poem slips into a hagiographic narrative underlining the spiritual powers to the protagonist.

The songs with the theme of Mewadi Rana or Rana of Mewar performed by Manginyar community as bhajans also focus on her husband’s life being threatened by the Rana. The group Pokhran Manginyar³² sing of the atrocities of the Rana so much so the protagonist longs to return home but she can not. The Rana here merges with the husband but his atrocities make him stand apart from the other. Sung as a petition, the song is accompanied by the folk instruments like, the tambura, kartal and dholak. The lyrics hereunder:

Don’t give my husband sorrows oh king of Mewar
Don’t ditch him, don’t cheat him
My anklets are next to your turban
I long for your return, while I am dressed up for you

Another of her Rana poems translated by Robert Bly, Mirabai refers to the control of the Rana over her body and her being. She refuses to be with the bridegroom, the Rana figure here, for the sake of the mountain lifter Lord:

I don’t like your strange, strange, world, Rana.³³
There are no holy men in it, and the people are trash.
I don’t wear jewelry anymore; I don’t bind my hair.
I’ve give up darkening my eyelids and doing my hair
the married way.

Mira’s Lord is the One Who Lifts Mountains, I don’t need a bridegroom.

Robert Bly and Jane Hirsfield’s translation focuses on personal freedom remaining persistently focused on the theme of love and subjective states, interpolated with poems rejecting courtly culture,

³²“Mewade Re Rana”Pokhran Manginyar. Backpack Studio season 3 Indian Folk Music Rajasthan

³³Robert Bly. 17.



family honour and domestic confinement. Mirabai ideologically complex figure battled medieval patriarchal society. This society was particularly hostile to women, entrapped in rigidities of orthodoxy, caste/class and religion. Her literary work whether available in orality or in written manuscript read sans rose-tinted glasses would enable readers/critics/translators not fixate her merely a writer. She would then not be contained in mould of writer of romantic and sentimental devotional verses, considered personal outpourings and subjective soul cries and ideologically vacuous.

Often translations locate the text of Mira's padavali (not her life so much) in ahistorical, timeless and socially neutral vocabulary not in the introduction/preface but the target text. Scholars also point to her silence on social inequality, problems of caste/class and plight of women, and her disengagement with social evils and institutions. She thus, comes across as lacking in reformist zeal in comparison to male bhakti poets. Ultimately, this critique her poetry extends to the view of bhakti as complicity in dominant ideologies and hegemonic structures. The Rana poems however, as the alternate Mira tradition show a different social consciousness that resists facile categorization of her poems as *saguna* bhakti oriented verses.

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