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# Gandhi's Mira: Debating “Female” Suffering and the Politics of Iconography

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## Abstract

During the first decades of the twentieth century when the Indian freedom struggle movement gained momentum, M. K. Gandhi often evoked Mirabai—the sixteenth-century *bhakti* poet-saint—in his public speeches and voluminous letters. This article demonstrates the degree to which Gandhi's maneuver fundamentally altered Mirabai's image as a national and cultural symbol, and how it prompted the mobilization of women in the larger nationalist movement. Through the process of appropriation, Mirabai's image evolved in the Indian cultural realm from a woman charged with promiscuity into an ideal “chaste” woman. Gandhi's intervention further initiated a moral renaissance parallel to the nationalist current where women transgressed the thresholds of traditional domesticity and became active agents of non-violent resistance—Hindu/spiritual in essence—inspired by Mirabai's suffering and compositions. Gandhi's Mira emerged as a literary-cultural hybrid that circulated in public spheres, as Mirabai became a public icon and a vehicle for women's emancipation alongside national liberation.

With the nationalist movement burgeoning in the interwar years, M. K. Gandhi (1869–1948) frequently evoked the sixteenth-century *bhakti* poet-saint Mirabai in his public speeches, prayer meetings, and in private letters. Mirabai, a Rajput princess turned mendicant, figures in Gandhian narratives alongside Hindu mythological characters such as Sita, Draupadi, and Damayanti, projecting “ideal” Indian womanhood. Gandhi frequently quoted and extrapolated from Mirabai's *bhajans*—which were also sung during his prayer meetings—and in the process, recrafted her life-narrative to a significant extent. This amounts to an extraordinary retelling of Mirabai, who was labeled with promiscuity (Mukta 1994).<sup>1</sup> In Gandhi's narrative, Mirabai became an epitome of virtue, with the ability to liberate herself from patriarchal and authoritarian forces.

This article suggests that Gandhi's revival of Mira initiated a cultural dialogue where her *bhajans* became a driving force for Indian nationalism, and it is through her that Gandhi negotiated the question of caste, social hierarchy, and cultural integration in colonial India. Gandhi's interaction with the Indian masses by bringing a historical figure such as Mirabai to their home-front is pivotal to understand the politics behind

canonizing a woman of royal lineage and elevating her status as an “ideal” woman-saint during the Indian freedom struggle movement.<sup>2</sup> To emancipate the masses who were traditionally relegated to the margins of the colonial society, Gandhi delivered a “saintly” Mira, a “chaste” woman in essence and a “nationalist” in character, who embodied human suffering and moral discipline. Through Mirabai, Gandhi entered their private spaces, the restricted women’s quarters, de-intellectualized religious ideas, and mobilized women for political activism.<sup>3</sup>

Central to this historical enterprise of a “national” narrative was Gandhi’s Mira, a literary-cultural hybrid. The journey of Mirabai—a sixteenth-century Rajput princess who discarded her Kshatriya roots for spiritual pursuits—is used to map the tradition of spiritual world of Indian women, which Gandhi idealized to address the colonized nation. Her image is juggled between imagination and reality as well as history and legend. Popular narratives of Mira, including her own compositions and those attributed to her, including different hagiographies, plays, and monographs, situate her within a domain of constant struggles and suffering based on gender and caste-based violence (Sangari 1990). Mira’s suffering embodies a harrowing picture of lived reality at a time of political unrest against which her character is arrayed as one challenging cultural norms of her age. Her unrelenting *bhakti* becomes a cornerstone of Gandhi’s political theology, upon which his notion of a “sacred” Hindu feminine energy is conceptualized to address the case of women in colonial India. Her *bhajans* are introduced in public and private domains by Gandhi time and again to valorize the ethic of universal human suffering through self-actualization (Varghese and Rath 2022).

There are references to Mira in hagiographical texts such as Nabhadās’s *Bhaktamal* (1600 CE) and *Pothi Prem Ambodh* (1693 CE). In these texts, Mira is portrayed as a woman going against the tide, who gave up her high social status consciously for a spiritual quest which in turn flourished as a social movement. These narratives provide a quintessential reading of Mira’s history, suffering, and legend, leaving behind a rhetoric of appropriated historiography. Her life events—complicated with an equal measure of history and myth, almost palpable—are to be read carefully to underline the nuanced thread of political and cultural appropriations. She is believed to have flouted social and religious norms of her age once she began her spiritual pursuits. This undaunted dissent has drawn critical attention to the character of Mirabai. Communities of women identify themselves as Mirabais and live on public charity to ensure social security. Her *bhajans* are sung in numerous Vaishnava shrines dedicated to the popular Hindu deity Krishna, and they have also become a site for the marginalized communities in India to voice their dissent against caste and gender hierarchies, in which Gandhi is said to have played a major role (Mukta 1994). A substantial body of literature is attributed to her as well.

Scholars disagree on locating Mirabai within a specific historical framework, yet a general consensus has been established that she lived between the late fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth century.<sup>4</sup> She is said to have been born in a royal Rajput Rathore family at Merta in Rajasthan to Ratan Singh, son of Rao Dudaji of Jodhpur (Rajasthan). Narratives suggest that she was the only child of her parents. Her mother, who is said to have died while she was very young, had a lasting influence on her religious and spiritual affiliations (Chaturvedi 1966; Shekhawat 2019). Legend has it that she was married to the heir apparent of the Sisodiya clan who hailed from the powerful ruling state of Mewar, but she became a widow soon after the marriage.

It is believed that Mirabai refused to commit *sati*,<sup>5</sup> arguing it was Krishna whom she considered her eternal husband and not any mortal man. Consequently, she was accused of thwarting Rajput honor by her in-laws and had to face death threats from them. Two incidents are highlighted in most versions of Mira's story: first, Mira is sent a poisonous snake in a basket full of flowers, which miraculously turns into a garland, and second, she is offered a cup of poison which she gladly drinks and remains unaffected.<sup>6</sup> When the threat to her life persists, Mirabai decides to go to Merta, but leaves for Vrindavan soon, from where she travels to different places and eventually reaches Dwaraka. It is believed that she miraculously merges into an idol of Krishna in Dwaraka in 1547, thus bringing her mortal existence to an end. This legend varies from narrative to narrative, and in the process the historical Mira is hidden among appropriations of lore and legends developed through the centuries. Frances Taft (2002) remains critical of the image of Mirabai circulating in the public domain and suggests the need for meticulous research in order to trace her lived life. Her life and works have been appropriated and quoted in multiple times and spaces, especially during the Indian freedom struggle movement, and at present she is an icon of destitute women as well as a path of salvation in Vaishnava theology. Gandhi's intervention in using Mirabai legends to castigate colonialism is suggestive of his vision of a reformed Hindu society and nation. This vision of an "ideal," "sacred" nation comes with an array of complicated histories, congeries of human suffering and passion, and molded into a metanarrative of resistance that is susceptible to change every time it is invoked in public and private spheres of political activism.

This article suggests that the dawn of the twentieth century witnessed Gandhi collaborating with Mirabai as well as her legends that circulated in public domain to provide a cultural icon for domesticated Indian women. Gandhi's knowledge of Mirabai and her *bhajans* was limited to popular *bhajans* attributed to her, sundry mythological or hagiographical tales he read and internalized in his childhood, in addition to the controversial version of the account of Mirabai by Lt Col James Tod first published in 1829.<sup>7</sup> For over four decades, Gandhi used the religious symbolism of Mirabai and took her saintly image to the Indian home-front to provide women and the destitute with an icon to relate to so they emerge as an independent force toward their own liberation. This is significant for two reasons: first, it brings in the question of women in the Indian "nationalist" context, and second, it stimulates a religio-political renaissance where Mirabai emerges as a national emblem of emancipation among Indian populace in colonial India. Chloe Martinez (2018), while reading Mira and the first-person narration in *bhakti* poetry, argues that the "autobiographical pose" in such a discourse is rendered as a potent tool to engage in critiquing "existing hierarchies, such as those of caste, gender and economics," and gradually people "have often used Mira's poetic voice or even assumed a Mira persona, her voice of fierce resistance providing a voice for their own struggles" (421). In Gandhi, Mira's defiance subsumes within itself the rhetoric interplay of nationalism, *swadeshi*, and women's emancipation. It illustrates Gandhi's idea of bringing women to the forefront of national liberation while breaking the shackles of domesticity, patriarchy, and in the contemporary context, colonialism (Kupfer 2007). Reading Gandhi's speeches and letters with a focus on his revival of Mirabai, this article suggests that it is this dissent in Mirabai's *bhajans* upon which Gandhi constructs his ideology of liberation. In Gandhi, one may find trajectories of political ideas intersecting with a plethora of Hindu ideals at a point where a religio-cultural renaissance takes place and, in Indian cultural context, Mirabai's *bhajans*, popularized by Gandhi, become a counter-site for women's emancipation.

### Mirabai in Indian archives

The Mirabai archives consist of sources which are chiefly literary and cultural texts that present a chronological shift in the representation of Mirabai in Indian historical tradition. Hagiographies are the earliest known sources of Mirabai. Two early hagiographical manuscripts—Nabhadas’ *Bhaktamal* believed to have been composed around 1600 and Priyadas’s *Bhaktirasabodhini Tika* (1712) which is an extended commentary on *Bhaktamal*—document Mirabai expressing her ardent love and devotion toward Krishna. She is represented as a fearless and devoted woman who overcomes death multiple times and discards worldly pleasures, shame, and family ties following her spiritual pursuits (Nabhadas 1914; Priyadas 1914). Priyadas presents Mirabai as a beloved daughter of her parents who relentlessly persuade her to marry despite her devotion. Incidents of discord and dispute between Mirabai and her in-laws are also narrated in the text, including that of the worship of *kuldevi* (a female household deity), which she refuses, leaving her in-laws indignant. Another incident presents Mirabai as a woman who, owing to her acquaintance with spiritually inclined men, is accused of maligning the honor of her Rajput family. These incidents supposedly triggered the in-laws’ schemes to plot her death. An account of the Mughal emperor Akbar, visiting her with Tansen in the text, is a continuing matter of debate among scholars (Hawley 2005). The same event is iterated in various other texts as well.<sup>8</sup> Mirabai’s story in *Bhaktirasabodhini* concludes with her having merged into the idol of Ranchhorji (Krishna) at Dwaraka in Gujarat. With her acts of defiance such as refusing to commit *sati* and worshipping the *kuldevi*, Mira not only challenges the authority or orthodoxies of her time, but also paves an alternative to the *bhakti* pursuit for generations to come.

An anonymous manuscript from Punjab titled *Pothi Prem Ambodh* (1693)—intended to be performed at the court of Guru Gobind Singh—locates Mirabai within the *bhakti* canon and is “the oldest substantial narrative of her life to have yet been discovered” (Hawley and Mann 2008, 199). In the narrative Mira’s own father seeks to “murder his daughter” but fails owing to divine interventions (Hawley and Mann 2008, 213). In popular versions it is usually her in-laws who try to harm her, but *Prem Ambodh* situates a similar plot in her own household, suggesting Mira as a vulnerable character in her familial landscapes. Taft (2002) states that narratives comprising chronicles, genealogies, and tales of mighty warriors were preserved orally as a tradition in Rajput kingdoms since the thirteenth century and came to be documented in written form starting the fifteenth century. *Munhata Nainsi Ri Khyat*, documented by Munhata Nainsi (1610–70), the Dewan of Maharaja Jaswant Singh of Marwar (1629–78), is one among those seminal texts which provide a timeline of the royal genealogies of major clans of Rajasthan. While Taft suggests that recorded genealogies such as the *Khyat* are reliable sources to draw a chronology of Mira and hence there was an individual by her name in history, Hawley (2005) argues that the *Khyat* is open to critical questioning. Drawing from the *Khyat*, Taft records that Bhojraj was one of the sons of Rana Sanga and Mirabai Rathor was “said to have been” married to him. It is at this point that Hawley suggests the manuscript has its own shortcomings as a reliable source to draw a historical portrait of Mirabai, since it seems to be based on popular beliefs (91).

Nancy Martin’s (2000) observation of the European writers who were engaged in writing Indian history in the early nineteenth century is pertinent to locate the reconstruction of Mirabai during the colonial period. Mirabai and her legends became

synonymous with a cultural tradition that had already given voice to the oppressed and had massive popular appeal. Many European writers were fascinated with this princess-turned-mendicant and documented her life and legend within the cultural history of Rajasthan, which consequently marked the genesis of an academic approach toward Mirabai. In addition, the references to Mirabai in the early works of European writers such as Major David Price (1827) and H. H. Wilson (1828) taken up by James Tod in his *Annals* (1829–32) also popularized the glorious martial history of Rajasthan (Martin 2000). Tod's *Annals* soon became a cult text on the subject and was referred to by different popular spokespersons of India in rehabilitating the concerns of the colonized populace.

Indian scholars responded to the European reading of Mirabai and sought to frame a counter-narrative to Mira's history. Such attempts are evident in texts such as Kaviraj Shyamaldas's *Vir Vinod* (compiled between 1879 and 1888), Harimohan Mukherjee's *Rajasthaner Itihasa* (1884), Gopal Chandra Mukherjee's *Rajasthan* (1885), and G. M. Tripathi's *The classical poets of Gujarat and their influence on society and morals* (1892). Nancy Martin writes, "As the history of Rajasthan grew to be a nationalist concern in the late nineteenth century, a new, more complete portrait of Mira emerged in the construction of Hindu nationalist and revitalized Rajput identities in response to colonial domination" (2000, 166). The mythical image of Mirabai has been perpetuated through literary constructions and performances of her life and legend in the twentieth century through texts such as Charles Kincaid's *Tales of the saints of Pandharpur* (1919), and James H. Cousins' *The king's wife* (1919), Eleanor Lucia Turnbull's *Little plays from Indian history* (1931), Dilip Kumar Roy's *The beggar princess* (1955) and *Chaitanya and Mira: Two plays* (2012). The trend still continues today with anthologies of Mira's poems being translated and read while becoming part of the *bhakti* canon. Besides literary representations, religious sites exclusively dedicated to Mira in Merta and Chittor (Rajasthan) and Mathura (Uttar Pradesh) remain integral to Mira's religiosity and sainthood.

A new Hindu identity was in the making when native intellectuals began drawing on the works of European writers on Indian martial races, especially on the Marathas, Sikhs, and Rajputs, who were known to have exhibited unflinching courage in times of political or cultural crises. This revival of a martial culture in oriental studies—especially in works such as Tod's *Annals* (1829) and J. D. Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs* (1849)—further provided the spokespersons of the liberation movement with an impetus to draw nationalist energy from different historical figures belonging to these clans. In the case of Gandhi, it was Mirabai, among other female icons such as Sita and Draupadi, who became a vehicle to unite the Indian populace against colonialism. The personal suffering and resolute character of these women's lived experiences drew Gandhi to weave a narrative of female resistance, idealized upon the ethos of sanctity of being, self-actualization, and non-conformity. His imagined nation, built on the ideals of suffering and *seva*, required the relentless participation of women populace, while undergoing intense moral refining.

### Gandhi, Mira, and the ethic of "female" suffering

Hardly three months would have passed after India's independence (August 1947) before Gandhi was to celebrate what would eventually become his last birthday. He had made a special request to M. S. Subbulakshmi, the renowned Carnatic vocalist, who had risen to national fame with her performance of the life and legend of

Mirabai in the Tamil movie *Meera* (1945). The fond request was to have Subbulakshmi sing Mirabai's *bhajan* "Hari tum haro jan ki bhir" (Hari, you take away the suffering of the people), a song that epitomized people's inevitable suffering (George 2016).<sup>9</sup> The song presents Draupadi—one of the female figures from the *Mahabharata* whom Gandhi idealized in his conversations—in a state of predicament among other mythological characters and how Hari (Krishna) would rescue each one of them.<sup>10</sup> Gandhi and Subbulakshmi had met before. Her charity concerts had earned her a special reverence in Gandhi. The Hindi version of *Meera* (1947) had taken the nation by storm. Subbulakshmi was hesitant at first, rather doubtful if she would be able to do justice to the *bhajan*, but on Gandhi's insistence, she had it recorded overnight and sent it to him by air. In 1948, the assassination of Gandhi took the world by shock and grief. Subbulakshmi's moving rendition of "Hari tum haro jan ki bhir" was played as a tribute to Gandhi on the All India Radio.<sup>11</sup>

Prior to Gandhi's request, M. S. Subbulakshmi had already earned fame promoting Indian art and culture in India and abroad. In the Tamil rendition of *Meera*, Subbulakshmi had played the role of the protagonist. T. J. S. George in *M.S. Subbulakshmi: A Definitive Biography* (2016) notes that it was Sadasivam whose relentless efforts brought Subbulakshmi to the notice of the Indian masses. By that time, she had already acted in a few Tamil movies, but a breakthrough was needed to propel Subbulakshmi's singing and acting career. *Meera* became that breakthrough.<sup>12</sup> Around 20 of Mira's *bhajans* made it to the movie, all of which were sung by Subbulakshmi herself. The movie was a commercial success, but what was more interesting was the popular reception that Subbulakshmi had received. With a powerful musical rendition of Mira, Subbulakshmi had become a living embodiment of Mira herself, and the Tamil audience witnessed the magical devotion of a north Indian saint, who had crossed the linguistic borders depicting culture and religiosity.

What made Subbulakshmi a national celebrity was the Hindi remake of the same movie, which was released on the day of Diwali in 1947, three months right after India got independence. The Hindi rendition took Subbulakshmi's image of Mirabai beyond the Tamil borders, nationalized it to a significant extent, and brought her massive national acclaim. Sarojini Naidu, who had given an on-screen introduction to the Hindi premiere of the movie, commented, "The story of Meera is the story of India, the story of Indian faith and devotion and ecstasy. Subbulakshmi's performance [shows] that she is not an interpreter of Meera but Meera herself" (George 2016, 144). George also notes how *Meera* was a "personal triumph for MS" and that "when she walked along the streets of Dwaraka singing Meera bhajans ... the pilgrims there just refused to believe that it was all film shooting. For Krishna devotees, she was Meerabai reborn. Her own devotion lent her role an ethereal depth" (144). Soon, upon the suggestions of C. Rajagopalachari, Subbulakshmi was asked to retire from acting in movies altogether as a "singer-saint" who had left an indelible mark in the minds of native and non-native people alike, among whom were personalities such as Prince Philip, Lord Harewood, Pope Paul, Dr S. Radhakrishnan, G. D. Birla, and Mother Teresa (154).

Gandhi's invocation of Subbulakshmi in the nationalist context and constantly associating her with Mira while reflecting the same in public sphere are seminal to understanding his interactions with women and the marginalized in colonial India. When Gandhi asks Subbulakshmi to sing Mirabai, she collaborates with Gandhi and Mira to join the Gandhian liberation movement on the cultural front. Subbulakshmi is further encouraged to transgress her *devadasi* roots and enter the cultural thresholds of Brahminism albeit Gandhi is claimed to have de-brahminized Indian culture to a

significant extent.<sup>13</sup> T. Sadasivam, a Brahmin himself, had transgressed his cultural traditions by accepting Subbulakshmi, a woman of *devadasi* roots, as his second wife. It is intriguing though that while Subbulakshmi transforms herself with the newer Brahminical roots through marriage and becomes a vehicle of culture, there emerges a parallel public persona of Subbulakshmi singing the *bhajans* of Mirabai and popularizing them. With Gandhi's endeavors to bring Subbulakshmi to the nationalist forefront, she too seeks an alternative route through the nation, an identity that requires her more to be herself rather than being either a *devadasi* or a Brahmin.

Ashwini Tambe (2009) observes how Gandhi dismantled the "masculine character of anti-imperialist politics" by mobilizing women to the national forefront, chiefly associating their agency with national liberation alongside political representation (21). She also pertinently notes the exclusion of certain class of women, including prostitutes, in Gandhi's nationalist ideals for they were considered "overtly sexual figures" (24) and were termed as "symbols of men's lust" (28). Notably, Mira was also accused of promiscuity, but nowhere in Gandhi do we find a mention of Mira with such an accusation. Such selective omission of one aspect of Mira's suffering to accommodate another amplifies the problematic reading of Gandhi's Mira. While Gandhi urged Indian prostitutes to become "*sannyasinis*," he refused to accept any donations from them, even for the national project (Kishwar 1985, 1693). But for Subbulakshmi, a *devadasi*-turned-Brahmin, Gandhi developed immense respect, though *devadasis*, who were occasionally charged with temple prostitution, hardly found any representation in the Gandhian liberal nation.

Strikingly, Subbulakshmi's *devadasi* roots became acceptable only when she had married a Brahmin and contributed to the national cause. Her embodiment of Mira became instrumental in this enterprise as it secured her feminine "ideals" that Gandhi had envisioned in women. In fact, this was not the only category of people who were excluded from Gandhi's political interests. On the basis of their sexuality, people within his fold were required to perform certain well-defined roles for the national reconstruction project. The ethos governing Gandhi's activism in this regard suggested that people renounce their sexuality as the first step toward reaching the greater goal at the expense of personal suffering for the nation. Women thus became the target public for Gandhi to revive and revolutionize the national spirit (Gandhi 1942). From 1906 onwards Gandhi embraced the identity of an asexual person, following his spiritual and moral calling. Though colonization castrated Indian psyche and portrayed them as "feminine," different cultural icons were brought in for de-colonization, re-masculinization, and Gandhi's answer was to glorify "feminization." While Rabindranath Tagore favored the sacred androgynous consciousness time and again in his writings,<sup>14</sup> Gandhi, an asexual by then, espoused the agency of icons bearing "feminine" resistance such as Mirabai.<sup>15</sup> However, his identification with the eunuch community came with their appropriation in this non-sexual or asexual discourse as well (Choudhury and Rath 2023). He associated his asexuality with a higher purpose of personal suffering and salvation, in the process of which the nation in his moral imagination was founded on collective *seva* through personal *bhakti*. For him, "there could be no *bhakti* without service" (Gandhi 1999, vol. 62, 364). With Gandhi de-brahminizing and de-intellectualizing Indian language and destabilizing hegemonic social relations, Subbulakshmi is accommodated into that space of self-sufficiency, where her transgression is equated with that of the "chaste" Mira. Both Subbulakshmi and Mira thus become *satyagrahis*, who, as per the popular belief of the *bhakti* tradition, remain unaffected by both praise and blame, a trait Gandhi sought

to achieve among his *satyagrahis*.<sup>16</sup> Ashis Nandy in his essay “Final encounter: The politics of the assassination of Gandhi” (2005) suggests that Gandhi’s political philosophy challenged the Indian traditional patriarchal system and colonial architecture in two significant ways: first, through his attempts to subvert the idea of what were considered to be the center and the margins of the Indian society, and second, by destabilizing gender hierarchies long prevalent in India as well as in the colonial culture. Gandhi’s political activism aimed at bringing the marginalized to the center of the liberation movement as a dynamic mechanism to counter the colonial project.

With Gandhi’s intervention, the social struggle of Subbulakshmi becomes synonymous with the suffering of Mirabai, who was castigated by society for controversial reasons: the former, with a *devadasi* background, became the second wife of a Brahmin freedom fighter and journalist, whereas the latter discarded her Kshatriya identity for ardent spiritual pursuits and was rejected by her own community. Consequently, Subbulakshmi evolves as a political icon for sociocultural emancipation, the same way Gandhi endorses Mira as an exemplary poet-saint for women’s liberation from patriarchal household. Sudhir Kakar reminds us in *Mad and divine* (2008) that Gandhi’s “spiritual style is unique in so far as Gandhi outlined a vision of spiritual life that does not seek to renounce the world but to change it,” and maintains that his spiritual practice does not ignore “the grime and tribulations of everyday life but informs it” (84). The Gandhi-Mirabai-Subbulakshmi triumvirate thereby forms a rhetoric of conceptual spiritual energy where the woman-figure—castigated by her own society yet accommodated by another—comes to the forefront of a sociopolitical movement. Moreover, Subbulakshmi’s immense popularity as a cultural icon amongst the common masses resembles that of Mira’s. In the field of Carnatic music, customary social and patriarchal norms would not accommodate a woman with a social baggage such as Subbulakshmi’s. But her relentless devotion to her art provides her with a platform where she transgresses the said norms in the pursuit of her art. Mirabai had also shunned the contemporary norms of her Rajput family in her *bhakti* toward Krishna. Gandhi was intrigued. A parallel could be drawn between the history and the lived experience of both the *satyagrahis*. And in Gandhi’s cultural landscape, Subbulakshmi was now Mira reincarnated.

Subbulakshmi continued to support the cause when Gandhi and C. Rajagopalachari approached her to perform in benefit-concerts to raise money for the Kasturba Memorial Trust in 1944, which she gladly accepted. It also “established a happy nexus between MS and the mainstream of nationalistic life” (George 2016, 150). This came at a time when setbacks and wrong turnings were numerous in Gandhi’s personal and political life. It was when the nation that he sought to create with a community life of religious harmony was sure to be divided, and the future of a united India did not exist anymore. A state of depression and spiritual torment tore Gandhi apart. Further, in Gandhi’s ideal nation, the question of women’s emancipation held less importance than other social issues such as caste divides and religious intolerance that shook the public and personal image of the *Mahatma*. In this predicament, Gandhi tried to emulate Mira, or so to say, equated his struggles with Mira’s (Mukta 1994). He stated: “Have you forgotten that Mirabai was at death’s door because of her valiant continuance of your experiment in spite of her being deathpale, and in spite of my having almost fallen prostrate with weakness?” (1999, vol. 61, 197). Further, when the world witnessed violence and terror at the outset of the World War II in 1940, he wrote, “Like Mirabai, I [Gandhi] too, am pierced with the dagger of love” (1999, vol. 79, 370). In yet another instance where Gandhi addresses a gathering



at a prayer meeting in New Delhi in November 1947—when India and Pakistan undergo the trauma of partition—there is (self-)assurance that “If we too become servants of God alone like Mirabai, all our troubles would be over” (1999, vol. 97, 274). Gandhi’s volatile efforts to confront the battle against violence, injustice, and discrimination, both outside and within, only adds to his existing predicament. Failing to achieve his ideal utopian *Ramarajya*, he finds rehabilitation in Mira and her *bhajans*.

Another paradoxical aspect of Gandhi emulating Mira as a woman of flesh and blood presents how Gandhi is lenient with his masculinity where he tries to infuse Mira’s “ideal feminine” qualities such as her meekness, docility, submissiveness, purity, and piety within himself and others. Gandhi calls Mira “saintly” (1999, vol. 10, 64), hardly evokes her defiance, and labels her as “a model wife” who “bore with quiet dignity ... all the injuries ... to bend her to husband’s will” (1999, vol. 20, 40). It is the same process through which the hegemonic structure of patriarchy is restored: “Mira said that she paid no heed to what the world said, since she had not left her husband but only wished to discover the true meaning of devotion to one’s husband” (1999, vol. 37, 123). Gandhi’s inability to liberate Mira from patriarchal architecture has to be contextualized within the framework of the presence of a male god in Mira’s devotional scholarship. Kumkum Sangari equates this “devotion” toward the husband among Rajput women and states: “The wife too takes on a relation of generalized subalternity to her lord-husband-master. She is subordinated via men to the state and domestic service of the husband becomes analogous to religious service” (1990, 1466). Mirabai, who rejected her earthly husband and refused to commit *sati*, is far from being an “ideal” Rajput *pativrata*, but her dramatic end in most narratives where she merges into the idol of Krishna symbolizes her physical and spiritual communion with the male deity, the “eternal husband” she aspired to submit herself to. Mira, as is patronized, becomes *sati* figuratively, by becoming one with her “husband-god” and achieves the title of a *pativrata* (Harlan 1992). Similarly in Gandhian narrative, the hegemonic gender hierarchy is restored. Gandhi, while reviving a submissive yet resistant Mira, ironically tries to restore this “social order” that Mira disintegrated with her resistance. He preaches love and devotion for a “noble” cause where Mira’s *bhajans* become a means for that end.

Gandhi’s reconstruction of Mira contradicts the “actual” Mira portrayed in different *bhakti* texts. She is a literary-cultural hybrid that circulated in his imagination and is canonized as a poet-saint for women’s participation in the freedom struggle movement. It becomes a strategy to negotiate public portrayal of emancipated women in anti-colonial movement. With hagiographies positing that Mira abandoned her family name, social decorum, the modesty of a widow, and was charged with promiscuity by her own community, it becomes crucial to understand the label of harlotry internalized in Mira narratives. Mira’s own community calls her names, but her songs reiterate the label and attempt to liberate herself from constant accusations:

What do I care for the words of the world?  
 The name of the Dark One has entered my heart.  
 Those who praise, those who blame,  
 Those who say I am crazy, wicked, an uncontrolled fire.  
 (Bly and Hirshfield 2004, 49)

Mira, as a *bhakta*, struggles to move beyond blame and praise; however, in public domain, as Parita Mukta suggests in *Upholding the common life* (1994), the name

“Mira” for long has been “a term of abuse levelled at women in Rajasthan, as a charge of promiscuity” (2). Mira sings incessantly, and though at some point she seeks to gain solace in the Divine, she eventually frees herself from both praise and blame: “I’ve stripped off shame and family custom / To go to the bed of the Dark One” (Bly and Hirshfield 2004, 52). Mira’s *bhajans* present a context where she is castigated and it is the idea of non-cooperation that brings in the metaphor of suffering. In Gandhian narrative, as DiSalvo (1997) suggests, the idea of non-cooperation is used as a viable weapon against colonial practices. In its ideal form, suffering here is used as empowerment of the marginalized since, in their self-interest, they avoid violence of all means. Finally, there is a reconciliation between both the oppressor and the oppressed—both in Mira narratives and Gandhi’s Mira—suggesting that oppression not only dehumanizes the oppressed but also the oppressor, an idea reiterated in Paulo Freire (1970). So while the subordinated communities accommodate Mira and her *bhajans*, they also internalize her suffering. Their devotion becomes stronger when they come out of the home-front like Mira and gather to sing. While Gandhi forms a docile Mira who is loyal, it is the loyalty and commitment toward the divine that Gandhi seeks in Mira who in times of conflict sings: “Mira says: The town thinks I am loose, but I am faithful to the Dark One” (Bly and Hirshfield 2004, 53).

On the one hand Mira, as a *bhakta*, renounces her social status and remains unaffected by the judgments of the world, and on the other, her human consciousness, conditioned with social conventions, makes her to reconsider the socially imposed “shame” she spurns and rejects to uphold. And the conflict continues in her *bhajans*. Although Mira tries to renounce every tradition that holds her back, it becomes evident in her compositions that she is affected by it. Her own clan accuses her of immorality and castigates her, but the marginalized who domesticate her *bhajans* remain sympathetic to her. Mira’s suffering transgresses social codes through her *bhajans* and she is in turn idealized by her marginalized counterpart. Her perceived harlotry—though symbolic here—is subsumed by her afflictions, and like a true *bhakta* who sees the Divine in everything, she becomes indifferent to both praise and scorn alike. Gandhi’s Mira is evocative of this mental capacity of denunciation of any praise, which he equates with the cherished qualities of a true *satyagrahi* and seeks to train the Indian populace with an equal resilience at the face of suffering while fighting for the nation and its defining morals. Since Gandhi believed that “the potential of Indian womanhood was buried under the incubus of ignorance, superstition and domestic slavery,” Mira’s life and legend were invoked to cultivate morality (Emilsen 1987, 75). Gandhi thus implores the Indian populace to educate their daughters so that they can match the ideal of Mirabai. Through Mira’s *bhajans* and *bhakti*, he seeks to reach the Indian masses where spirituality is equated with truth, and truth is equated with the nation. Gandhi’s clarion call of women’s emancipation and resistance transcends time and space, and echoes in the contemporary cultural discourse. There are communities of women who, till the present time, gather to sing Mira’s *bhajans* at temples and dance on the streets, and this act of transgression is validated in the Indian religious practices since Mirabai’s life has been viewed as a microcosm of emancipation (Rath 2018).

### Mirabai and the question of Indian nation

Mirabai was constantly appropriated during the Indian freedom struggle movement, and popular spokespersons of the movement such as Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo

Ghose, and M. K. Gandhi used the religious symbolism of Mirabai numerous times to address the nation at distress. The period witnessed the development of Mirabai from a *bhakti* poet to a literary-cultural hybrid which was revived to serve the political agenda of nationalist struggle and women's emancipation.<sup>17</sup> The Mira in Gandhi's dialogues is a figure primarily active on a front which is "devotion-based," and her resistance is against the rigid patriarchal and religious norms that situate women at the margins of society. Her austere spiritual pursuit, restraint, and disciplined, minimalist lifestyle spoke for the *satyagrahi* that Gandhi had always envisioned.

For instance, in 1917 Gandhi writes, "Satyagraha is soul-force, as opposed to armed strength. Since it is essentially an ethical weapon, only men inclined to the ethical way of life can use it wisely. Prahlad, Mirabai, and others were satyagrahis. ... Mirabai was a satyagrahi" (1999, vol.16, 12). By declaring Mirabai a *satyagrahi*, Gandhi brings her to the political realm, thereby "feeding her into a nationalist political culture," and encourages women to participate in the struggle for freedom (Mukta 1994, 12). Madhu Kishwar (1985) in "Gandhi on women" analyzes Gandhi's approach toward women from three aspects: social, political, and personal. Gandhi's efforts in mobilizing women started from within the households attacking colonial policies on basic commodities such as salt. The salt march (1930) saw the monumental participation of women. Further, Gandhi's approach toward women's sexuality marks a crucial turning point with regard to Mirabai. Kishwar notes that, although Gandhi advocated women's autonomy over their own body, a "noble woman" was imagined as a "sexless being ... and legitimate sex ... is meant [only] for the purpose of procreation" (1692). Women were not to be led away easily by their carnal desire. Gandhi believed that giving up physical comforts of any nature would help direct a person's spiritual energy for a higher, nobler cause. It is at this juncture that he associated individual thought and action with national liberation. The idea of personal *bhakti* coincided with national *seva*. With women, therefore, while spinning and *khadi* were perceived as means of *satyagraha* that would provide them with economic independence, it did not really liberate them from traditional roles that they were meant to transform and transgress. And while he advocated female "chastity" negating women's sexuality, he also endorsed widow remarriage, mostly because child widows were a "serious menace" and child marriage, "glaring abuses of Indian womanhood" (Kishwar 1985, 1692). Moreover, it is interesting to note that though Gandhi emphasized women's empowerment, bringing them outside their private spheres, his idea of emancipation did not bring within its fold women transgressing long-held gender roles. They were considered "ideal" as long as they restrained their sexuality, even within marriage, and nurtured their children, especially daughters (the future wives and mothers), with moral upbringing "who can [be] compare[d] with Mirabai and Rabia Bibi" (Gandhi 1999, vol. 7, 12).

Apparently, widow remarriage domesticated and prepared Indian women to serve patriarchal forces to a significant extent. To have a husband/protector or be viably available for procreation was the only means of "legitimate sex." Gandhi's effort in recuperating Mira's legacy within the domain of political activism came with similar attitudes toward female sexuality. While Gandhi endorses a Mira who is "chaste" and "free" from all worldly desires, he in a roundabout way silences her sexuality as a free woman. In general, while poet-saints are perceived as people who have transcended all worldly affections, what is often overlooked is the sedimented expressions of poetic and sensuous exhilarations in *bhakti*, very lively in the *bhajans*. Mira's compositions or those attributed to her are full of vigorous pictures of love and longing. The spiritual transgresses the sensual but does not completely overpower it. Mira's awareness of being a

woman madly in love with Krishna transcends physical longing to reach a plane of self-actualization through her *bhakti*. The physical or sexual desire transcends and merges with the spiritual. It does not negate her sexuality rather amplifies it in the spiritual plane. The longing or the associated suffering is equated with the sacred, and it becomes crucial to understand what aspects of Mira's personality and her narrative Gandhi omits from his own while following her on his spiritual odyssey.

Equally arresting is Gandhi's frequent employment of the motif of thread or spinning: "Mirabai has chanted: 'God has bound me with a string of yarn, I am a puppet in His hands'" (1999, vol. 29, 64). For an ardent advocate of *swadeshi* like Gandhi, thread becomes a crucial metaphor to propel a native economic renaissance. By quoting Mirabai's *bhajans*, Gandhi emphasizes that the thread represents spiritual connection between the devotee and the deity, and he uses the thread-metaphor of Mira to voice against authoritarianism. The thread is metamorphosed in Gandhi's dialogues from a symbol of *bhakti* to a working device of *swadeshi*, designed to achieve economic liberation for Indian masses and social liberation for the marginalized. Gandhi quotes Mirabai: "God has tied me with a cotton thread. Whichever way he pulls me I am His. I am pierced by the dagger of love.' This is from a famous bhajan of Mirabai. Swaraj hangs by that thread; it does not snap because the weight is that of love" (1999, vol. 87, 300). The thread on a surface level signifies a bond, a relationship, which connects a devotee with her God, but there are deeper political connotations here as well. The thread, as is seen, is a bond of love that exists and thrives on complete submission to the Ultimate Being. For Mira, it is Krishna, and for Gandhi, it is the nation, the motherland. Only when one submits selflessly to the service of the divine (nation), one can achieve true liberation, both in this world and beyond. Gandhi's role in bringing this "historical" and "national" Mirabai to the nationalist front is integral to the development of Mirabai and the current image of Mira circulating in public spheres (Varghese and Rath 2023).

Nancy Martin, drawing from Ashis Nandy's study on colonialism, states that with the exposure of Rajasthan to nationalism in the early nineteenth century, with its lore of Rajput valor and integrity, the attention was directed toward Mirabai, an ideal character of womanhood and human suffering. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's reconstruction of Krishna as an "ideal", martial male icon "to reshape Hindu identity" required an ideal woman of similar stature; the said icon was to be of submissive and non-violent nature so as to complement the nationalist cause by negotiating maximum participation of people, especially women, to which Mirabai fit perfectly (Martin 2000, 167). A "new" Mira was thus constructed to suit this purpose, and Gandhi's Mira gained momentum over the decades. Akshaya Kumar (2007) suggests that in the nationalist discourse there is a hegemonic interplay of social relationships where submission of the female subject to the male authoritarian figure becomes integral to sustain patriarchal interests. He further notes that "By invoking Meerabai in the pious nationalist context, Gandhi not only domesticates the 'harlot' Meerabai, he invents an Indian ideal of womanhood from within his own local tradition" (2007, 179).

Gandhi moreover goes a step further in humanizing and contemporizing Mirabai in the national context. He presents the various *avatars* that Mira has been envisioned with in multiple discourses. For instance, he heartily accommodated Madeleine Slade, British admiral Sir Edmond Slade's daughter, who left her aristocratic life and pursued Gandhi in her search for a *guru* (Kakar 2004). Gandhi contemporized Mira in the image of Slade and sought to see her image in Slade's pursuits of a spiritual life in India. Gandhi bestowed the name of Mira as an honorary title to her and christened her "Mirabehn." By then Gandhi also had labeled Sarojini Naidu, popularly known as

the “nightingale” of India, as Mirabai for her active participation in the freedom struggle movement. Slade abandoned her social privileges to be Gandhi’s devout acolyte, while living in his *ashram*, participating in his prayers, and actively lending her services for the Indian nation. Her struggle is thus equated with Mirabai’s who had also abandoned her home to gain a home in the world. Naidu accompanied Gandhi on the political front. She was entrusted with the responsibility of the Indian National Congress. Both the living Miras represented an indomitable spirit of dissent and worked primarily for women’s emancipation. So when Gandhi projected the idea of a “*satyagrahi* Mira,” he was in fact constructing a “humanized” version of Mira—unaffected by the allegations of the world—which he displayed in his female disciples, his living Miras. So in Gandhian narrative, the women *satyagrahis* who represented Mira by transforming and transgressing the mythical and the cultural remained as significant as M. S. Subbulakshmi who sang and performed Mira’s *bhajans* for national reconstruction.

Gandhi’s act of reviving Mirabai by including her *bhajans* in daily prayers at his *ashrams*, inviting artists such as M. S. Subbulakshmi to promote her legacy, and idealizing her as a model wife and *satyagrahi* became a turning point in the representation of Mirabai in contemporary Indian cultural discourse. What drew Gandhi to accommodate Mira in the freedom struggle movement and allowed her *bhajans* to be sung in his social spheres has both personal and political connotations. Mira was married off at a very young age and was widowed soon. Mira as a child widow and a *bhakta* transgressing and transmuted as a potent force of female resistance reverberated in Gandhi a near redemption from his own guilt of child marriage and its harrowing consequences. Thus, with each woman who transgressed the repressive domesticity and contributed to the national struggle, Gandhi sought redemption from an outdated patriarchal guilt. Ironically, it only modified women’s roles with cumbersome morals within the household and the political sphere rather than abolishing it altogether. A new patriarchal reckoning overtook the other—it seemed like liberating women but had them constrained to a new, modified set of gender and social roles. Mrinalini Sinha (2000), while reading Partha Chatterjee, notes that the nation imagined in the nationalist discourse had to rely upon the image of the “modern Indian woman,” and that “the cultural-nationalist project of fashioning the modern Indian woman, therefore, necessarily included some limited emancipation of, and even self-emancipation by, women within its own gendered logic” (624–25). Consequently, a language of moral discipline was invented to accommodate the Indian masses, especially women, to counter colonialism, and the daily prayer meetings became the mode of that language. Mira’s *bhajans* metamorphosed into a common language of the nation and *bhakti* toward the motherland—which also involved Gandhian notion of *seva*—emerged as the key sentiment in achieving liberation. Both Mirabai and Subbulakshmi performing music signified a kind of resistance that resonated in their lived experience, and this experience was epitomized as *seva* by Gandhi. Thus, prayers, including the *bhajans*, became the language of *seva* and an integral element in Gandhian dialogues. With the intervention of the political spokespersons of the freedom struggle movement, especially Gandhi, Mirabai transcends the thresholds of the socially ostracized communities and enters the Indian household.<sup>18</sup> When Mira enters the national frontiers idealized as a woman-saint, her image is equated with a cumbersome moral force to counter colonialism. Thus, the new “nationalist” Mira becomes an epitome of truth, piety, and suffering, yet submissive in the question of womanhood and has traveled far from the pages of history to the contemporary cultural discourse, to an extent where the “historical” Mira of flesh and blood has almost transformed in the process.

In short, Gandhi projects a three-dimensional Mira: very virtual, almost real, and a magnified icon to propel the *swadeshi* movement to reach every Indian household. “Home” thus becomes a site of national culture for Gandhi and women are encouraged to take charge as the custodian of this culture. Subsequently, Gandhi’s Mira takes the form of a venerable figure of devotion, a “saint.” She becomes a site where people identify themselves with her struggles, *bhajans* are composed and recreated, the identity of the marginalized communities is restored, and consequently a whole new spiritual tradition comes into existence. The radical nature of *bhakti* breaks away from religious orthodoxies and becomes evident in the compositions and the lived experiences of the saints. By declaring Mirabai as a *satyagrahi*, women are encouraged to manufacture basic goods as a means to earn their livelihood, thus providing them with economic independence and security. They come out of their limiting private spaces and participate in singing *bhajans* and dancing to them. In addition, they form communities where their opinions are voiced. With the patronage of a global leader such as Gandhi and the impact he had on Indian women, it becomes crucial to identify and locate similar practices in contemporary cultural discourses where the voice and suffering of a destitute woman is appropriated to serve political ends, however revisionist the history can become.

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## Notes

1 The charges of promiscuous behavior that surround Mira’s persona in popular narratives and compositions attributed to her redefine the meaning of “promiscuity” in Mira’s social landscape. Parita Mukta (1994) explores this complex mechanism of situating Mirabai within these shifting narratives as she moves in the public domain, singing, dancing, and participating in public performances of devotion. Noting one such instance in a present-day engagement, Mukta recalls a Brahmin priest in Chittorgarh (Rajasthan, India) telling the audience that Mira was a *bhaktin* (also a woman belonging to a certain caste in Rajasthan who earns her livelihood singing, dancing, and offering her body to men), giving the idea of a “loose” woman or a prostitute (180). Mukta presents a *bhaktin* as “a female *bhakta*.” Singing and dancing in public (even in deep *bhakti*/devotion) is long since equated with promiscuous behavior in Indian cultural setting. One may argue whether it was Mira’s defiance within her aristocratic household that invited such allegations of promiscuity, or her public expression of *bhakti*, or both. Gandhi’s careful omission of Mira’s said transgressions, i.e., popularizing a “censored” narrative of her life and *bhajans*, only complicates the meaning of promiscuity in the present context. Mukta notes how Gandhi carefully omits the Gujarati term for a widow, *rand* (also a derogatory term used for prostitutes) in a Mira *bhajan* in his *Ashram bhajanavali* (1930), a collection of *bhajans*/hymns curated and translated from various sources which were sung during the morning and evening prayer meetings in Gandhi’s *ashrams* (148, 149). What becomes seminal in this enterprise is the complex nature of meaning(s) attached to the term “promiscuity,” and how, with Gandhi’s intervention, Mira’s suffering stemming from that experience is also erased in the process.

2 Much of Gandhi’s contribution in this enterprise owes to his own experience with women within his household (Gandhi 2011). In his autobiography, Gandhi pertinently writes how he was moved by his mother’s devotion and her self-control evident in her recurrent fasts. He speaks, in a rather guilty tone, regarding his wife’s poor educational background and their early marriage (26, 27).

3 Raka Ray and A. C. Korteweg (1999) in their historical documentation of women’s movements in the Third World write of the cultural and sociopolitical mobilization of women, and how it contributes to collective identity construction to aid nationalist interests during the freedom struggle movement. It is often argued that tribal and peasant women were already mobilized by then. Gandhi’s intervention proved

momentous when the middle-class and elite women associated themselves with his saintly “Mahatma” persona and pledged their allegiance to him. See Sinha (2000) for an extended reading on the subject.

4 Based on the accounts of Indian scholars such as Munshi Devi Prasad (1905), Parashuram Chaturvedi (1973), and Gaurishankar Ojha (1925–41), A. J. Alston in his introduction to *The devotional poems of Mirabai* (1980) suggests that the narrative of Mira’s biography has been woven within Indian culture through additions and omissions from multiple sources.

5 Sati is a Hindu rite where a wife immolates herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. The Bengal Sati Regulation was passed on 4 December 1829 by Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor-General of British India, which officially banned the practice. For further reference, see Hawley (1994). Also see Shetty and Bellamy (2000) for a discussion on Spivak’s “Can the subaltern speak” as they venture into the gendered appropriation of Hindu scriptures and traditions such as *sati* and situate them within the (post)colonial discourse.

6 The earliest references to this incident can be traced back to Nabhasdas’ *Bhaktamal* (a brief hagiographical account of saints, believed to have been composed in the sixteenth century) as well as Priyadas’ critical commentary on the same which is titled *Bhaktirasabodhini tika* (1712).

7 James Tod served in the Intelligence Department during the Third Anglo-Maratha War (November 1817–February 1818) as an officer. He was entrusted to integrate some of the areas of the Rajputana region (present-day Rajasthan) and to bring them under the control of the East India Company. During his stay at Rajputana, he conducted research in and around the region, which he published as *Annals and antiquities of Rajasthan or the central and western Rajpoot states of India* in 1829. A second volume of the same appeared in 1832. Tod’s account of Mira is rather brief and sometimes erroneous, especially when he claims Mirabai to be the wife of Rana Kumbha. This is iterated by Gandhi in his speeches. References to Tod’s *Annals* are not rare in Gandhi either. For further information, see Gandhi 1999, vol. 5, 126; vol. 21, 192; vol. 23, 78; vol. 51, 252; vol. 54, 168–69.

8 Akbar meeting Mirabai is a popular anecdote in Mira narratives, especially in plays such as *The king’s wife* (1919) by James H. Cousins and *The beggar princess* (1955) by Dilip Kumar Roy and Indira Devi.

9 The “Ashram bhajanavali” in the *Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1999, vol. 50, 323–406) consists of 13 *bhajans* of Mira, among which “Hari tum haro jan ki bhir” is one of the most popular *bhajans* which is closely associated with Gandhi and M. S. Subbulakshmi. Another popular *bhajan* was “Mere to Giridhar Gopal” that epitomized unwavering faith in times of suffering and the devotee’s utmost reliance on the Supreme Being.

10 The concept of universal human suffering that Gandhi often evoked in his political theology had snippets of Mira *bhajans* that had a wider appeal among Indian populace. For a discussion of how Gandhi appropriated this particular *bhajan*, see Varghese and Rath (2022).

11 Tyagaraja Sadasivam, Subbulakshmi’s husband, would recall later how she was traumatized following Gandhi’s assassination and could not sing this particular *bhajan* for over a year. Swati Thiyagarajan, Subbulakshmi’s grand-daughter, writes about the incident in one of her blogs (January 1, 2016). She recalls Subbulakshmi was devastated by the assassination of Gandhi to such an extent that she fainted and was left with grief for a very long time. For further reference, see <https://www.ndtv.com/blog/gandhijis-request-to-my-grandmother-ms-subbulakshmi-1261287>.

12 The story of Mira was chosen by Subbulakshmi herself. Ellis R. Dungan—the then popular American director who is said to have revolutionized Indian cinema—was the director, with Sadasivam as the producer. Kalki Krishnamurthy, a poet and Indian independence activist, wrote the screenplay (George 2016).

13 Both T. J. S. George and Swati Thiyagarajan mention the struggle faced by M. S. Subbulakshmi to fit into the Brahminical society with her *devadasi* roots, in which T. Sadasivam, her husband, is credited to have been her constant source of moral support. Gandhi also challenged the caste hierarchy by bringing the socially diverse Indian population to a horizontal lane of political discourse. His intervention with the subdued castes he called “harijans” is an instance of this maneuver.

14 Tagore in his essay “The religion of the forest” (Ray 2012), in an effort to reconcile India’s glorious past with universal suffering owing to human greed and colonization, writes thus of the sacred androgynous, or the *ardhanarishvara* (the united form of *Siva* and his consort *Shakti*): “When Sati, the Spirit of Reality, through humiliation, suffering, and penance, won the Heart of Shiva, the Spirit of Goodness ... from the union of the freedom of the real with the restraint of the Good, was born the heroism that released Paradise from the demon of Lawlessness” (217).

15 The earliest reference of Mirabai in Gandhi's *Complete works* dates back to 1907 when he refers to her as an exemplary woman-ideal to be emulated by young Indian girls.

16 In Gandhi's dialogues, his understanding of *satyagraha* as the "soul force" coincided with Mira's resolute character and her devotion towards Krishna as her "eternal husband," which directed her defiance and passions in the form of her compositions as tools of resistance against oppression and authoritarianism (1999, vol. 16, 6).

17 Central to this appropriated image of the "popular" Mirabai is James Tod's *Annals* (1829) where he suggests that Mirabai was the wife of Rana Kumbha, and his account has been charged with factual errors (Martin 2000). The controversy arose when Har Bilas Sarda (1867–1955), the author of the monograph on Rana Kumbha, claimed that Mirabai was in fact married to Bhojraj, the great-grandson of Rana Kumbha, in 1516 and that she had died by 1546. Gandhi does not seem to be aware of this conflicting historical fact and reiterates this information in his public speeches and private letters, where Rana Kumbha is presented as Mirabai's husband (1999, vol. 14, 176; vol. 25, 185). However problematic the information may be, Mirabai becomes an answer to the question of Indian nation and hers becomes a socially acceptable path in Gandhian *satyagraha*.

18 Prior to Gandhi, Mirabai finds a unique reference in the political discourse of popular spokespersons such as Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghose, Sister Nivedita, and Annie Besant, who were instrumental in raising the question of the Indian nation. Mira is often significantly mentioned in the conversations of Swami Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita, which is duly recorded by the latter in her journals. Annie Besant's *Children of the motherland* (1906) presents a romanticized version of Mira as a lovelorn mystic. The Mira of Aurobindo Ghose in *The renaissance in India and other essays* (1997) is humanized as a woman of intense emotional faculty who finds reconciliation through her *bhajans*.

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