

Madhav Hada: *Meera vs Meera: Devoted saint-poet or determined queen?*

Translated from the original Hindi *Panchrang Chola Pahar Sakhi Ri* into English by Pradeep Trikha, Vani Book Company, New Delhi, 2020, Hardcover Price: Rs. 699

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Reflected in the literatures of the times, is the contours of a culture or civilization. Sometimes these literatures acquire the status of truth – when it becomes difficult to challenge the literary representation. Certain figures in literary works, rooted in stereotypical traditions which have been canonized in a revered image, are the most onerous to talk about. In a multi-religious country like ours, Meera occupies a space in this definite canonized form. Meera who belongs to all, emerges from Bhakti literature and has long engaged the devotee- readers as well as feminists. In recent times, academics too have started to engage themselves with her persona – a mystic saint (as established), as well as, a human being. This is where one can lace a well-researched book of Madhav Hada – *Panchrang Chola Pahar Sakhi Ri*.

The scholars of English literature too have not been able to remain away from the lure of Meera. Emerging from the brittle core of Indian culture, reading Meera has fascinated many. In the contemporary scenario of academic research, the translation of *Panchrang Chola Pahar Sakhi Ri* as *meera vs meera* by Prof. Pradeep Trikha has surfaced as a much-needed work to be referred to. An engaging trans-creation of the Hindi version, Prof. Trikha's book has given us deep insights into Meera's spiritual quest to merge with Krishna. Meera emerges as a reticent/resolute woman defying gender discriminating norms with conviction and grit. The latter, always overshadowed by her canonized image, finds its unfolding here. The book *meera vs meera*, divided into six sections – 'Life', 'Society', 'Religious Narratives', 'Poetry',

'Canonization' and 'Image Construction'; attempts to show how Meera's poetic oeuvre, along with her saint poet image, has engulfed her being, which belonged to the corporeal world as well. The first two sections justifiably place Meera, a saint-poet, in the mediaeval history of Rajputana. These sections disclose how Meera is rarely mentioned in historical writings, but has visibility in devotional and religious biographical sketches. *Bhavishya Purana*, *Bhaktaimal*, etc, alongside historians/writers like Harinarayana, Purohit, Gopinmath Sharma, Hermann Goetze, etc all focused on Meera objectively. Meera's childhood, married life, pilgrimages are mentioned in the history of Rajputs, to give the readers a sense of context. It also corrects the misconceptions on the social positioning and status of women in the medieval era. Popular culture - films, songs, comic-picture books have cemented the image of a "saintly, feminine, lovelorn" woman. The book acts as a critical discourse challenging the fortified religious representation of Meera by a society that is engrossed in spiritual and religious structures.

Prof. Trikha's incisive vocabulary and aesthetic decisions, retain the flavor of the original even in the section which uncovers Meera's exemplification in various religious narratives – oral, folklore, historical sources as Khyat, bahi etc. and Hindu devotional literature. Not only has her Bhakti/devotion been instrumental in securing a place in religious literature, but also her use of regional language adds to the charm of being a saint- devotee. This section establishes how history can be re-traced through her – Meera as a woman resisting patriarchy and a "plethora of stereotypes." The book adequately mentions religious writers like Prabhudas, Raghavdas, Priyadas, Shri Hariharan Vyas, et al who exalt Meera as a woman in addition to being a devotee. These narratives sometimes incorporate miracles in Meera's life events, which

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actually is a common trait of devotional biographies. In fact, how she refuses to follow a sect, unlike other saint-devotees, allows her a distinct presence. Nevertheless, her reverence for fellow devotees needs a special mention and appreciation. Moreover, there is a reference to people who tried to malign her (Ramdas, Krishnadas) for not following the religious dictates, making the book retain its objective unbiased, stance.

The section on poetry interrogates Meera's contemporary position as a poet-saint, and romantic writer, yearning for Krishna. It reveals how her poetry views patriarchal ideologies and its constraints while also highlighting her love for Krishna. Her language belongs to the common people though she was a member of the Royal family. This makes her poetry popular. Her verses reflect a distinguished 'feminine identity, psycho-spiritual needs, and her struggle for dignity and freedom' as well as '...reveals her corporeal self, torn by divine longing.' (161) Further, her imagery of earth, river, ponds, trees, sky, animals, sea, castle, jewelry, clothing, etc. reveals that only select facets have received attention, ignoring others like remarks/observations on the feudal system, religious institutions and public relations. Though the focus of Meera's poetry is certainly faith and devotion, yet undercurrents of a sensual aesthetic life can also be seen. Her worldly sufferings, pleasures, relationships also find expression in her words. The book also mentions other women poets like Daya Bai and Sajha Bai, thus, adding a comparative perspective upon Meera

The last two sections focus on the canonization and image making of Meera. Col. James Todd, whose interest in history and authentic recording secure his position as a historian, 'relied on tales and poetry' passed on orally in the case of Meera. His work on her, developing out of folk memory, popularized her as a saint, cemented her devotee image and became conducive to her 'canonization.' This book carefully deliberates on her canonization where the

human Meera has been eclipsed by the mystic poet. Other scholars like Munshi Deviprasad too could not carry out individual research and, under the colonial influence, only added to Meera's stereotypical aura that of a saint-devotee. Todd's construction of Meera also develops the fact that he did not wish to offend the feudal lords of Rajputana and hence, ignored Meera's engagement with the corporeal world. 'He transformed her multifaceted life and identity into a unidimensional love story full of romance and mysticism.' (195)

'Meera's image is based more on speculations and inferences than actually on facts' (200) and in effect has been constructed. The colonial historians have played a major role in this and even Indian scholars were influenced by their viewpoints. Emergence of publishing houses has contributed towards an already existing image of Meera as a mystic saint. Even popular books, newspapers, magazines, Amar Chitra Katha (with the intention of familiarizing children with Indian mythology), Diamond books, Cinema, too, did not deviate from Meera's formulaic representation. *meera vs meera*, nevertheless, establishes Meera not just as a poet, saint or legend from folklore, but rather as a woman with both courage and vulnerabilities.

As a translated work, *meera vs meera* remains true to its purpose — to expand the literary boundaries and locate Meera in an appropriate perspective. It offers a new vitality to the existing critical discourse on Meera. Prof. Trikha's book, with cultural flavours retained, aesthetics of language customized and emotionality of Meera preserved, makes it an excellent translation, interesting and engaging read. In addition, credit goes to the publisher Vani Book Company for an excellent production in terms of the cover page and the paper quality that make the book reading an experience worth the time spent on it!