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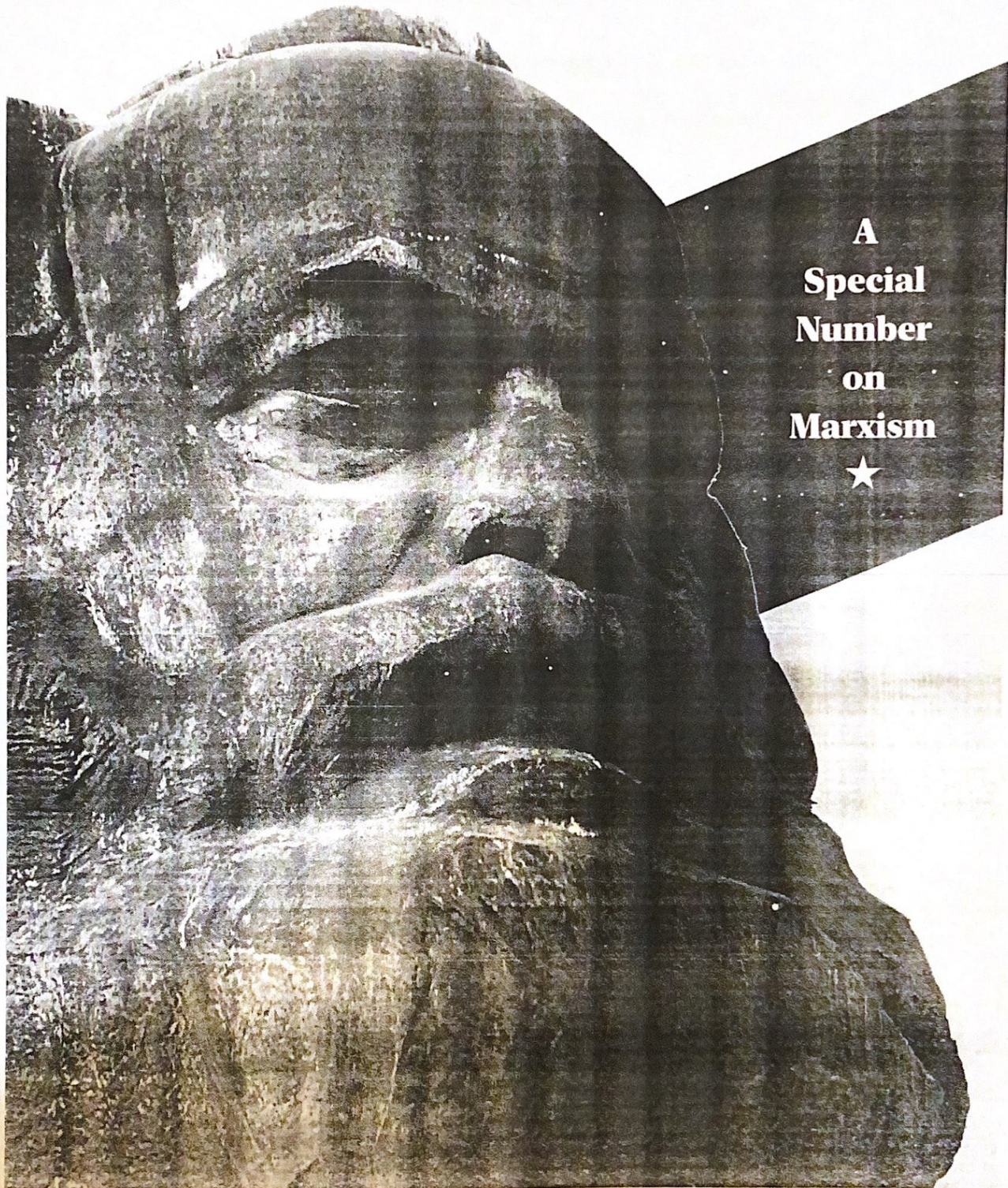
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Deconstructing the Dilemma, Reconstructing the Narrative: *Meera Vs Meera*

Author: Madhav Hada [Translated by: Pradeep Trikha]

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The conventional image of a royal princess, reconstructed by the Western canon and Indian historians, that of saint-poet Meera Bai, has tended to cast a long shadow over the quintessential Meera. She has been placed on either of the two polarities of devoted saint-poet or determined queen. Into this milieu comes the latest deconstruction of her life in the form of the book *Meera Vs Meera*. Written originally in Hindi by Madhav Hada as *Pachrang Chola PaharSakhi Ri*, it has been translated into English by Pradeep Trikha, whose scholarship lends deeper interpretation to the original work. He deconstructs the myth of Meera, questions the ideologies of Marxist and Feminist thought that have long sought to compartmentalize her in binary terms. Further, the author liberates Meera from the shackles of Western canonization, specifically the convoluted version of her life story in James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, and takes her above, beyond and over ideologies.

This new and refreshing approach to reading the historiography of Meera depicts her life in motion. It is not a simple rendition of the chronology of her life. Instead, her eventful life is seen in the context of the society and times in which she lived. The medieval period of history, in what comprises present day Western Rajasthan, is an intense saga of political upheaval, with the states of Mewar and Marwar, and the Mughal empire in Delhi, as starring characters. Between the kingdoms of Mewar and Marwar, lay the less-powerful kingdom of Merta, home to Meera, the royal princess and daughter of Maharaj Ratan Singh. With little or no mention in historical records, mystery shrouds her birth and death with no exact date of when and where she was born, and when and where she died. Most of the meagre sources cite her birth in the year 1498 in Kudki district of Pali, marriage in 1523 to Bhojraj (son of Maharana

Sanga of Mewar) and her death in Dwarka in the year 1546. Some sources cite her death to have been between 1561 and 1563. Her misconceived image, as passed down through later literature, is more speculative than factual. This deplorable lack of historical records takes Trikha on a journey to uncover the real Meera through her poetry. He contends that while the main source of information about her life and times is her poetry, it is not as simple as it seems. This is because her poetry is neither fixed nor restricted, instead it exists in folklore, and in many editions and languages. Further, as a readerly text, her poetry is open to many levels of interpretation. Vernacular sources, albeit meagre in their reference to her life, are a treasure trove of information. His research leads Trikha to realise that "Meera's poetry was not made to be 'taken' but to be earned" (13). This is the first indicator of the shift in accessing Meera; the book is an interpretation that allows flexibility of thought.

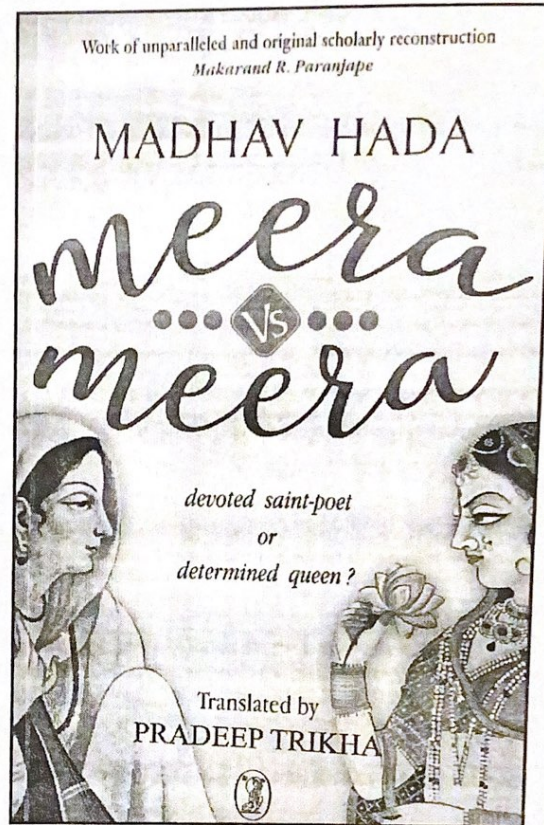
The book also subtly questions which version of Meera is free from fallacy? 'Honest historians', even Indian historians have only been able to access Meera through the lens of Western colonial resources. The other literary sources (including the vernacular and her poetry) comprise texts 'created' around Meera by the proponents of the Bhakti Movement and thus, become suspect in nature. The entire cultural discourse of Meera is a veritable dichotomy of images. Was she, as the feminists claim, the oppressed and marginalized widowed daughter-in-law in the royal household of Maharana Sanga? Trikha argues that she had agency. As a young royal princess in Merta, she had three scholars instructing her in the art of diplomacy and religious scriptures, as well as training her in sword fighting. The fact that she refused to commit *Sati* after her husband Bhojraj died has made the neofeminists cast her in the role of a challenger to the set patriarchy. Trikha challenges this view and instead mentions several instances proving the society of her time as one more liberal than it is credited with being. Inversely, the author highlights the practice of women in royal households having independent economic means during that period. Meera had received the parganas of Pur and Mandal from her father-in-law to take care of her minor expenses. "She never ran out of gemstones or jewellery or money" (14). Instead, she was given the freedom to donate money to saints, disburse salaries to her maids, build temples and go on pilgrimages accompanied by an expensive retinue of elephants, chariots and servants, which she could do without any questions being asked.

Trikha's narrative contests the archetypal image construction around the character of Meera, and he does this unequivocally. He believes that Meera has been a prey to the double standards of modern Indian society that believes in the ideation of its women. In order to idolize the women, the ongoing narrative around Meera has constructed her in the image of poet-saint who is left without a choice. Far from it, Trikha, with his erudite understanding, sees Meera as a flesh and blood normal woman with earthly desires, who time and again rebuts the male hegemony. Her songs for Krishna, when deconstructed, reveal an expression of desire. She was certainly "not a saffron-clad holy woman with a halo or an ascetic as she appears in popular literature

and modern media" (41). When she refuses *Sati* on the contention that she is married to Lord Krishna and will spend her life singing his hymns, she exercises a bold choice. *Sati* had been practiced in the royal Rajput households. When her brother-in-law, Ratan Singh died, three of his four wives had performed *sati*. She chooses to stay amidst the palace politics and intrigue that comes from Sanga having 28 queens in residence. Vikramaditya, the ruler who succeeds Maharana Sanga, also considers Meera a threat since she criticized and confronted him openly, and also had the support of the feudal lords who saw Vikramaditya as an incompetent ruler. He tries to get rid of her by giving her a

bowl of stagnated water that was contaminated. Meera survives but realizes that she will have to leave the palace for her father's home in Merta if she wants to live. Here again, she exercises her choice. From Merta, Meera travels to Vrindavan and stays there for six years, only returning to Mewar on the death of Vikramaditya. Her stay in Mewar is also perceived as a threat by the Pandas of Nathdwara, who were Vaishnavites, and opposed the Bhakti movement of Meera. She then moves to Gujarat and reaches Dwarka, staying in a small temple on the outskirts, before building a temple herself. Here, she gave various religious discourses and supported other saint-devotees. Whether she merged with the idol of Krishna in Dwarka in 1546 or escaped and went to South India, before travelling to the North and meeting Tansen, Birbal and Tulsidas in the Court of Ram Chandra Baghela, remains a point of contention for many. Some narratives also mention her visiting Amber and Mathura, meeting Man Singh and Akbar. However, the story of her life post 1546 is based entirely on folklore. Lack of authentic and verifiable resources do not allow for a common consensus to be reached. What can be said with certainty is that as an educated and empowered woman, she was aware of the turmoil around her and adopted life-saving strategies in the manner of a seasoned diplomat.

Trikha's reconstruction of the life of Meera allows him to posit her as a modest woman beyond the confines of the narrow binaries of a saint-



devotee or romantic poet. This compartmentalization has long been backed by both colonial and Indian historians, and stands challenged and disputed. Feminists portraying her as a vulnerable and oppressed woman have also done her a grave injustice. In this masterpiece of a translation, the author is able to recreate Meera as “a woman who used her poetry to combat injustice and barriers stemming from patriarchal norms” (160). Trikha suggests that her protest was clothed in *bhakti* but unlike other Bhakti poets of her time, Meera’s poetry espouses her “distinguishing feminine identity, psycho-spiritual needs, and her struggle for dignity and freedom” (161). Backed by extensive research, *Meera Vs Meera* uncovers the knowledge offered by the spiritual heritage of India. For all the mystery surrounding her, Meera’s appeal is enduring, universal and metaphorical. Trikha manages to give her a new life in a different language. It makes for an interesting, engaging and compelling read.

Anjali Singh