Singing the Subaltern: Meera's Poetry as Feminist Historiography

This essay positions Meera Bai as a pioneering voice of women's self-assertion in medieval India, interpreting her devotional poetry as a form of resistance articulated from the margins of both political history and patriarchal society. The term *subaltern* here refers to those excluded from dominant structures of power and denied a voice in official histories. Yet Meera's prolific verse, as examined in this study, offers glimpses of how she positioned herself within this marginal space. Cloaked in the language of devotion to Krishna, she entered a sacred realm that became a tool for defiance. The essay argues that her poetry transforms this spiritual space into one of resistance and self-expression, enabling her voice to reach the masses. Through her devotional acts and poetic compositions, Meera provides the basis for constructing a subaltern narrative that presents her as a proto-feminist in medieval India.

Drawing on selected verses, the analysis reveals a consciousness deeply aware of women's exclusion from formal records and structures of authority. In response, Meera crafts an alternative memory that centres on personal will, spiritual intimacy, and the rejection of prescribed gender roles. The discussion traces these strategies while also briefly comparing Meera with Lal Ded, a fourteenth-century Kashmiri mystic whose renunciatory poetry likewise subverted orthodox expectations. This comparative lens situates Meera within a longer lineage of women's voices that contested dominant narratives from within their own cultural and religious frameworks. In doing so, the essay not only reinterprets Meera's work but also contributes to a broader understanding of how women's spiritual writing can serve as feminist historiography from the margins.

Meera Bai: Life and Historical Context

A Rathore princess of the Merta clan, Meera Bai was born to Ratan Singh Rathore, the founder of Merta City in the Nagaur district of Rajasthan. In 1516 AD, she married Bhojraj, son of Rana Sanga and a Sisodia prince of Mewar. Like many alliances of the period, this marriage was politically motivated, designed to strengthen ties between the Mertiya Rathore clan and the Sisodias of Chittor.

The Rajputs, particularly the Sisodia clan, enforced strict patriarchal codes that regulated women's lives. A unique notion of honour developed, closely tied to women's bodies, which became central to the concepts of personal honour and shame. Importantly, female sexuality took on a broader significance; it was no longer just an individual matter but became essential to maintaining the ritual status and honour of the entire group, including family, caste, clan, and community. **(Tyagi 32)**

In Mewar, known for its long history of resisting the Mughals and safeguarding dharma (moral duty) and sovereignty, social norms were stringent. Women's chastity was closely linked to clan honour, resulting in stringent restrictions aimed at preserving it from socio-religious perspectives. **(Jain, Sharma, 2002)**

Between 1518 and 1523 AD, Bhojraj passed away. Notably, Meera chose not to perform sati, a now-outlawed custom where a widow was expected to self-immolate on her husband's funeral pyre. The following years brought further losses: in 1527 AD, her father, Ratan Singh Rathore, and her uncle, Raimal, were killed in the Battle of Khandwa; in 1528 AD, her father-in-law, Rana Sanga, also died. Amid this political turmoil, Ratan Singh, Rana Sanga's second son, briefly ruled Mewar before being assassinated by his brother, Vikramaditya. Vikramaditya then persecuted Meera. The scions of the Sisodiya clan viewed customs such as hypergamous marriages, purdah, sati, and jauhar as integral to their identity. Any erosion of these conservative traditions was seen as a threat to the cultural ethos of the state. **(Tyagi, 56)**

Meera sought refuge with her uncle Veeramdev in Merta, but the city was later destroyed by Maldev, ruler of Jodhpur. Because both her father and husband died before gaining significant political power, she is absent from traditional Rajput genealogical records such as the *khayaats* (chronicles) or *bahis* (registers). Ratan Singh, as the younger brother of Veeramdev, had no claim to the *Tikayat* (chieftainship) of their father Rao Duda, and Bhojraj never ruled Mewar. Consequently, Meera was never officially recorded as the daughter or wife of a reigning Rajput ruler. **(Hada, 2017)**

Patriarchal Society in Rajasthan

In elite Rajput households, male and female spaces were strictly divided: the *Zenani Deorhi* (women's quarters) and the *Mardani Deorhi* (men's quarters). According to *Nainsi's Vigat*, Maharaja Gaj Singh of Jodhpur restructured the women's quarters following the Mughal model, instituting a rule that prohibited males above the age of seven from entering the *Zenani Deorhi*. Earlier, the separation had been less rigid, with more openness between the sections.

Women of high-ranking Rajput families lived secluded within the *Zenani*, with rare and closely regulated contact with the outside world. Any external visits for religious or ceremonial purposes were conducted in covered palanquins, accompanied by attendants to safeguard privacy and uphold social customs. While such seclusion severely limited women's mobility, they could still exert influence in cultural, religious, political, and recreational matters — though always within the bounds of the domestic space.

The practice of seclusion reinforced male authority. With little freedom of movement, women became more dependent and thus easier to control. Even queens required the ruler's permission to leave the *Zenani Deorhi* or make decisions beyond it. Surviving letters reveal a tone of deference; grievances were couched in praise to avoid offending male authority. Rajput society was deeply hierarchical, enforcing the *purdah* system (female seclusion) and practices such as *sati*, female infanticide, and *johar* (self-immolation by women to avoid capture). **(Detha 2192–2201, 2015a)**

Meera Bai's Spiritual Defiance

It is within this patriarchal and honour-bound framework that Meera Bai's life assumes radical significance. *"I view Meera Bai from the point of view of how she chose a spirituality to defy patriarchy."* **(Jafa, 2025)** Meera used spiritual devotion to Krishna as a means to legitimise her resistance, crafting an alternative identity beyond the constraints of lineage and domesticity.

Her choice to write predominantly in Braj, a Western Hindi dialect, rather than her native Mewari, allowed her to reach a broader audience, transcending regional and social boundaries. In doing so, her poetry became a dual instrument for personal liberation and public engagement. The study of her work falls within the Bhakti movement, a religio-political current in medieval India that promoted the worship of a personal god, often through vernacular languages like Braj that not only broadened access to religious discourse but also empowered marginalised communities, including women and bhaktas (devotees) of lower castes, giving them a voice in spiritual life.

Meera's poetry bridges two major Bhakti traditions: the Krishnaite poets, who celebrated divine love through the sensual imagery of Radha and Krishna, and the Nirguna saints, who worshipped a formless god. Unlike Surdas and Tulsidas, she accepted Krishna as her faithful husband and lover. Her verses are suffused with virah, or the yearning and suffering in separation, serving as a metaphor for the soul's longing for the divine. **(Pandey, 1965)** Her poetry is not merely an expression of devotion; it is a testament to her self-confidence, strength of mind, unparalleled love for Lord Krishna, and the courage to challenge patriarchy, social norms, and religious dogmas. All of these aspects highlight her empowered self through both her life and her poetry. **(More, 2024)**

Meera Bai's Poetic Defiance: Proto-Feminism and Subaltern Historiography in Medieval India

"Feminism is a cultural as well as a political movement. It changes the way women think and feel and affects how women and men live their lives and interpret the world. For this reason, it has provoked lively debates and fierce antagonisms that have continued to the present day. Contemporary feminism and its concerns thus are rooted in a history stretching over at least two centuries." **– Jude Hannam, *Feminism*.**

Though speaking centuries before the emergence of modern feminist movements, Meera Bai articulates a voice that is unmistakably resistant to patriarchy. Her life and work stand as an early expression of proto-feminism within medieval India, offering a counternarrative to the silences of political and genealogical records. In the absence of her name in *khayaats* (chronicles) or *bahis* (registers), her poetry becomes an alternative archive. This subaltern history preserves the voice of a woman excluded from official memory.

She writes:

देवता की पायल बाँध के मैं नाचूँ गिरधर के आगे।

नाच-नाच के ही लगाऊँ भक्ति के रंग।

सीमा नहीं बाँधती मुझको गिरधर से प्रेम की।

परिवार की परवाह नहीं, मन की बात कहती हूँ मैं।

I will fasten the bells of his love to my feet,

And dance in front of Giridhar.

Dance and dance I will please his eyes.

My love is an ancient one, my love is the only truth.

I do not care about social norms, nor do I keep my family's norms.

I cannot even forget for a moment the beauty of my lover; I am dyed in his colour.

Here, the *payal* (anklet), traditionally an ornament symbolising feminine grace and marital decorum, is refashioned into an emblem of liberation. Meera takes a symbol intended to tether women to domestic roles and uses it to claim movement, visibility, and self-expression. In declaring that she "does not care about social norms" and "speaks her mind," she directly rejects the codes of silence and obedience imposed on elite Rajput women.

The power of this act lies in its doubleness; she is outwardly engaging in devotional performance, yet beneath that devotional guise, she is enacting a personal and political defiance, illustrating the *subaltern strategy*: speaking from within the cultural idiom of her society while undermining the very hierarchies that constrain her.

Her rejection of seclusion is even sharper in the verse:

"वाहरो का पल्लू छोड़ दिया,

मैं मुक्त हुई जन-मरण के चक्कर से।"

The veil is broken, and I am liberated from the cycle of birth and death.

The *pallu* (veil) here functions on two levels — as the literal garment that marks female modesty in Rajput households, and as a metaphor for all the ritualised restrictions that confine women's mobility and speech. In "Breaking the Veil," Meera is not only discarding a piece of cloth but dismantling the symbolic boundary that separates women from public and sacred spaces. The liberation she names is not only spiritual (*mukti* from the cycle of rebirth) but social freedom from the structures that define and limit womanhood.

Her declaration is even more radical in:

"मीरा कहती है मैं अपनी मर्ज़ी से जियूँ,

मेरा घर मेरा प्रेम है गिरधर।"

Meera says I will live by my own will; my home is my love for Krishna.

The line expresses complete rejection of the medieval Rajput ideal that her husband's lineage defines a woman's home. Here, Krishna is not merely the object of devotion; he is invoked to legitimise her choice to leave her marital home, abandon kinship obligations, and define her dwelling through spiritual love.

Twenty-nine songs in Chaturvedi's anthology begin with the pronoun "I," far surpassing any other opening word. **(Chaturvedy, 2012)** This repeated use of the first person is significant; it asserts individual agency in a culture where women's voices were often mediated through male authority. **(Kishwar, Vanita, 1992).** While traditional Bhakti usually emphasises surrender, Meera reconfigures it as empowerment. For Meera, surrender to Krishna is not an act of self-erasure but rather a foundation for self-assertion.

The fusion of personal emotion and divine allegiance transforms devotion into an act of resistance. By appropriating the rituals, symbols, and language of her culture, Meera enters the sacred space of Vaishnavite devotion, a space accessible to women. She uses it as a platform to express her defiance.

Her poetry serves both as feminist testimony, voicing resistance to patriarchal codes, rejecting domestic confinement, and asserting a fiercely independent self, as well as subaltern historiography. It preserves the lived experiences, emotional truths, and political consciousness of a woman often omitted from formal records, ensuring her place in history through verse rather than lineage. In giving form to what official chronicles have ignored, Meera not only claims space for her voice but also exposes the selective silences of historical memory, prompting a reconsideration of whose stories are preserved and whose are allowed to disappear.

By becoming "Matwali Meera", the unbound, ecstatic devotee, she dismantles the cultural and familial structures designed to confine her. Her words remain not just devotional songs, but also historical records of a woman's refusal to be silent, carrying her voice across centuries as part of a longer tradition of women who have inscribed themselves into history from the margins.

Parallel Voices of Defiance: Meera Bai and Lal Ded

Parallel to Meera Bai's poetic resistance, the figure of Lal Ded, a fourteenth-century Kashmiri Shaivite mystic poetess, offers a compelling comparative frame**. (Wasia, 2014)**

Born into a Brahmin household in a socially conservative Kashmir, Lal Ded, also known as Lalleshwari, married young but left her marital home to pursue a life of spiritual practice. Rejecting the constraints of domestic life, she wandered freely, often without material possessions, composing her verses (*vaakh*) in the Kashmiri vernacular. Her poetry blends deep philosophical insight with a piercing critique of social hypocrisy, calling for direct experience of the divine over ritual formalism.

In an era when women's voices were rarely heard in public spaces, her decision to speak openly, and in the people's language rather than the elite Sanskrit of liturgy, was itself an act of defiance. **(Wasia, 14)**

Despite differences in caste, geography, language, and religious tradition, Lal Ded in Kashmiri Shaivism and Meera in Vaishnavite Bhakti both inhabited the margins of official history. (Wasia, 26) Neither was memorialised in royal chronicles or genealogical records. Yet, both carved a space for themselves through poetry, inscribing their resistance in forms that survive as alternative histories of women's experience.

Lal Ded writes in Kashmiri:

प्रेम वासना और स्नेह सहन नहीं किया

क्रोध और द्वेष को त्याग दिया

एक हवा के झोंके से माया मोह और अज्ञानता की ज़ंजीरों को काट डाला

और इस प्रकार मैं मुक्त हुई

I did not bear with love, lust or affection,

I brushed off wrath and anger.

With a gust of wind, I cut the feet of attachment and temptation,

And thus I was emancipated.

In the Shaivite mystical tradition, this emancipation (*mukti*) signifies freedom from attachment (*moh*), desire (*vasna*), and illusion (*maya*). The image of cutting chains with a gust of wind mirrors Meera Bai's symbolic acts of breaking free from both spiritual and social constraints.

Meera's verse quoted earlier, where she uses the metaphor of the veil, which she disregards, expresses her act of defiance, similarly expressing release from enforced roles and boundaries, freedom from the cycle of rebirth, and social freedom from the codified honour system that tied women to male lineage and domestic duty.

From a feminist perspective, both Lal Ded and Meera strategically appropriate the religious idioms available to them, Shaivism for Lal Ded, Vaishnavite Bhakti for Meera, to claim space in traditions otherwise dominated by male voices. Their renunciations are not passive withdrawals from life but active refusals of the authority structures that regulated women's movement, speech, and desire. The subaltern voices often speak within the sanctioned languages of their culture while simultaneously disrupting the hierarchies embedded within them. **(Spivak,1988)**

In this way, Lal Ded's gust of wind and Meera's broken veil are culturally intelligible acts of devotion and, at the same time, politically charged gestures of defiance. Their verses also serve as acts of subaltern historiography. Denied representation in elite political narratives and excluded from official genealogies, they authored their records—preserving emotional truth, lived experience, and political consciousness in poetic form. Their's is history from the margins, told in the first person and vernacular languages, namely Kashmiri and Braj, that resisted the exclusivity of elite courtly and liturgical tongues.

As established earlier in the essay, a substantial number of Meera's songs begin with the pronoun "I," a deliberate strategy that asserts personal agency in a cultural order where women's identities were absorbed into male lineage and collective honour.

Read together, Lal Ded and Meera show that in medieval India, women could subvert patriarchal norms not by discarding religion but by reinterpreting it. Their poems transform devotion into an act of self-definition, using the symbolic and ritual tools of their traditions as instruments of feminist resistance and historical survival. Both voices endure not only as devotional figures but as chroniclers of women's defiance, their verses standing as living testimony against the silences and omissions of patriarchal history.

Conclusion

Meera Bai's verse demonstrates that the devotional can be as politically charged as the overtly defiant, that poetry can serve as both an instrument of spiritual longing and a record of historical resistance. Read as feminist historiography, her work exposes the fissures in patriarchal and political memory, showing how the subaltern speaks not by abandoning tradition but by inhabiting and reshaping it. In positioning herself through Krishna, she both conformed to and destabilised the structures that sought to silence her, ensuring that her voice survives where official history falls silent. *Singing the subaltern*, her poetry remains an enduring testament to how marginalised women claimed authorship over their narratives, transforming devotion into a legacy of defiance.

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