

AN EPISTEMIC POSSIBILITY OF MIRABAI'S SONGS INFLUENCING GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY

RAMA SUNDAR

Department of Music, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Vishwakarma University-Pune, Maharashtra

Abstract

This paper is a study of the music of two of the greatest Indians of all time - Mirabai and Mahatma Gandhi. While Gandhi was not a musician himself, he understood the supreme value of music and used it to support his ideologies. Gandhi collected songs, hymns and chants from various sources and revived them to enlighten and educate the masses. Mira's resolute personal rebellion which came through in her bhajans composed by her inspired Gandhi so much so that he made Mirabai a mascot of his own crusade against the British rule, using her bhajans as a tool. Gandhi was influenced by many imposing personalities and his ideologies were shaped by a complex processing of his understanding of philosophy and spirituality. This paper studies the songs of Mirabai that may have influenced Gandhi in forming his ideology which later came to be called the Gandhian ideology. To understand Gandhi's choice of music it is important to understand Gandhi's philosophy to life and living. He lived by eleven vows and these will be used as yardsticks to study Mirabai's bhajans vis a vis Gandhi's philosophy.

Methodology: *The research methodology is qualitative, data collection is through secondary sources and the paper uses retrospective study to make the analysis. For the final analysis, apart from a holistic study of hundred and fifty Mira bhajans, nine of the bhajans featured in the Sabarmati Ashram Bhajanavali have been studied using epistemic reasoning and conclusions drawn. Gandhi's lectures and letters on moral conduct and thoughts on leading a spiritually charged life have also been used for analysis. Since this is a study undertaken to enrich the Indian music fraternity, the lyrics of the above mentioned nine Mira bhajans have been given in the appendix. The appendix also has links to some of the famous renditions of Mira bhajans that were part of the Bhajanavali.*

Research questions: *Could Gandhi's eleven vows have been influenced by Mirabai's bhajans?*

What was the significance of the nine bhajans chosen in the ashram bhajanavali?

Did Mirabai's songs have an influence on Gandhi's Satyagraha?

Keywords: *Gandhian ideology, Mira's bhajans, Renounce, Ashram life, non-possession, satyagraha, rebel, promiscuous*

INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the 20th century, when India was deep into her freedom struggle, political thinking was firmly guided by the strong ideologies of its leaders. India fought for nearly a hundred of the two hundred years of British rule. During this period, India's resistance and fight assumed many forms and was led by various freedom fighters. It culminated in Gandhi's non-violent non-cooperation, which was a form of resistance that the British had not encountered anywhere thus far, much less experienced. Many years later the South African Apartheid regime would face a similar force in Nelson Mandela who was greatly influenced by the Mahatma's satyagraha. How did Gandhi get the idea of satyagraha? Who influenced the Mahatma's thinking? By his own admission, he had not invented the idea of satyagraha.

India is the land of the Vedas and Upanishads, the land of many religions and varied philosophies. These philosophies and spiritual ideas shaped and lead politics and culture of the society. This is evident from many important and historic events from the Indian freedom movement which were characterised by songs and chants that were drawn directly from the ideologies of our ancient rishis and philosophers. Amongst our leaders Mahatma Gandhi stood tall in using music and scriptures effectively to bring the masses together. Gandhi used the words of great saints, philosophers and songs of great composers to good effect by making many of them a part of the freedom struggle and as his ashram prayers. The carefully chosen songs were multilingual and multi religious. The essence of Gandhi's eleven vows was also brought to fore by these songs and bhajans. The eleven vows of Gandhi are the principles and values that are said to guide one to live a meaningful, spiritually grounded life. The table below lists the eleven vows and their translations in English.

Eleven Vows	Sanskrit	English
1	Ahimsa	Non violence
2	Satya	Truth
3	Asteya	Non stealing
4	Brahmacharya	Self-discipline and self-control
5	Asangraha	Non possession
6	Aswada	Control of palate
7	Sharira Shrama	Physical labour
8	Sarvatra Bhayam varjana	Fearlessness
9	Sarvadharm samantva	Equality of religion
10	Swadeshi	Self-reliance
11	Sparsa Bhavana	Non-discrimination based on colour and caste

More than seventeen hundred years back, Patanjali in his *yoga sutra* speaks about *Yamas*, as ethical restraints professing that these are the first step in the eight limbed path to enlightenment.¹ None of these eleven vows was new to Indians and Gandhi was the first to accept this. “I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and Non-violence are as old as the hills. All I have done is to try experiments in both on as vast a scale as I could”, said Gandhi. Gandhi was a mass leader and had millions of followers, one was them was Madeleine Slade who was British by birth. At the age of 33 she travelled to India to live at Gandhi’s *ashram* as his disciple. She was a strong admirer of Gandhi and the Indian freedom movement that he led. She shunned her Western clothes for homespun cotton and embraced Gandhi’s life of simplicity, minimalism and self-denial. She was appropriately given the name Mirabehn by Gandhi, after the mystic saint Mirabai. Mirabai was one of the many philosophers that deeply influenced Gandhi’s thinking. According to the Hindustani classical vocalist Neela Bhagawat, Gandhi revived Mira’s poetry, after they were shunned by the society who considered her promiscuous, rebel and a *kul naasi* (destroyer of clan). “It can be argued that it was Gandhi, who, in his public speeches and private conversations publicised Mira as a ‘saint’ challenging her promiscuous image and taking this saint to Indian home front for the emancipation of women”, says Ritu Varghese in her article.² This study seeks to examine the strong ties between Gandhi and Mira and the influence of Mira’s bhajans on Gandhian ideologies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is more than seventy-five years since Mahatma Gandhi died. He still remains one of the most studied persons in the world owing to his well-defined and articulated thoughts on a plethora of subjects such as health, diet, nutrition, spirituality, languages, art and music. Gandhi and music have not been discussed adequately; such a perspective has not come to the fore in the large documentation on Gandhi (Gandhi Marg, 2021)³ He had complete faith in the power of music as a way to attain *moksha* and was a patron of classical music. Musicians

¹ Ahimsasatyasteyabramhacharyaparigraha Yamah

² Mirabai in popular Imagination: Reading Bhakti canon in contemporary context.

³ <https://www.mk Gandhi.org/articles/Mahatma-Gandhi-and-harmony-of-music.php>

such as Pt. N.M Khare, Mama Fadke, Sri Vinoba and Balkoba Bhawe were a part of the daily musical prayers at the Sabarmati ashram (Mahatma Gandhi- A unique musician)¹

Mirabai's *bhajans* were an integral part of what Cynthia Snodgrass terms 'song-prayers' in her work, "The Sounds of Satyagraha".² She tracks Gandhi's masterful use of hymns, songs, chants and shloka from his days in Africa to the freedom struggle he went on to lead. These songs as they were documented in the *ashram Bhajanavali*, were voices from the past, the sacred words of the saints-singers who Raghavan calls the great integrators.³ The text in the *Bhajanavali* was internalised and the *ashramites* breathed life into them, many of which were a part of the forgotten past. Gandhi, Ritu Varghese argues brought Mirabai into the nationalist discourse, her image was constructed to suit the prevailing patriarchal society- 'meek, docile, perseverant, patient, noble and forgiving'.⁴ This paper concerns itself with the musicality and spiritual aspects of Mira's *bhajans* and Gandhi's interest in her songs and philosophy. It builds on the work of Cynthia Snodgrass by looking at the interconnection between Gandhi's choice of songs, his philosophy of music and Mirabai's songs. The analysis is from the point of view of a musician and the research findings seek to help music scholars and scholars of Gandhian studies.

ASANGRAHA

Man's highest endeavour lies in trying to find God, said Gandhi. "He cannot be found in temples or idols or places of worship made by man's hands, nor can He be found by abstinences. God can be found only through love, not earthly but divine."⁵, argued Gandhi.

That Gandhi searched for the divine, came through his study of the scriptures, various philosophies and religious texts in search of the Truth. When he was asked by a foreign journalist to sum up what the secret of his life was, Gandhi did so in three words "Renounce and rejoice", quoting from Isha Upanishad. Mira's life is but one of the finest examples of renunciation. Her *bhajans* give us a vivid vision of her singing and dancing in ecstasy, overwhelmed with love, a state similar to what is called *mast-allah* by the *sufis*. In one of her songs she says, "*pug ghungaroo bandh Mira nachi re, mai tho apne Narayan kee aap hee ho gayi daasi re*" (wearing anklets, Mira is dancing. I have become the servant of my Narayan)", in complete surrender.

It is believed that when Mira was a child, her mother gave her a Krishna idol, an *ashtadhatu murti*, which was to remain with her lifelong, igniting in her a passionate devotion for the Lord. Gandhi, who was initiated into the teachings of the Gita at a very young age regarded the teachings of the Gita to guide him in making difficult choices. According to him, "The Gita has been a mother to me ever since I became first acquainted with it in 1889. I turn to it for guidance in every difficulty, and the desired guidance has always been forthcoming."⁶

At the age of fifty-two Gandhi renounced his western clothes for loincloth or dhoti. While Gandhi donned dhoti in order to identify with the poor masses, Mira renounced her privileged life to identify and merge with the *sadhus*, *sants* and the downtrodden. In one of her *bhajans* Mira says, "*jo pahirave soyi pahirun*" (I will wear what you give), referring to her total surrender to her Lord's wishes, be it about her clothes or eating. The fact that she forfeited all her belongings is clear in the many references that she makes about giving up her jewels, silk sarees, relatives and home. In many of her *bhajans*, she uses the word *tyagi* to describe herself, a word which translates into someone who has renounced worldly enjoyment, who is freed from bondage.

1 Dr. Namrata Mishra, Gandhi in the new millennium-Issues and challenges, Khandwala Publishing House

2 Snodgrass Cynthia, The sounds of Satyagraha: Mahatma Gandhi's use of Song-Prayers and Ritual, University of Stirling

3 Raghavan, V, The Great Integrators: The Saint-Singers of India, 1966, Patiala House

4 Varghese, Ritu, Mirabai in Popular Imagination: Reading Bhakti canon in Contemporary Context, ISSN 0975-329X|<https://doi.org/10.12724/ajss.53.5>

5 Harijan, 23-11-'47, p. 425

6 Eashwaran on Gandhi and the Bhagawad Gita

About worldly possessions, Mira says,

“Aavo sahelariya Ralee karaam hee ghar gaven nivari

Jhoota manik mothiya re jhooto jagmag jyoti

Jhoota sab abhushan ree secchi piyaji pochi”

(Unreal are rubies and pearls! Unreal are all glitter and glamour! Unreal are all ornaments! Only the love of the beloved Lord is real! Unreal are silks and showy apparel! Only the love of the Lord is real, it keeps the body pure! Give up luxurious food!)

She says further, “My beloved Lord’s food is simple! It is good with or without salt! Don’t be jealous of other’s farms and orchards! Plough your own field! And good will come out of it! It is not your business if someone else has a rich and handsome spouse! It is not good to seek his company! It is better to be loyal to your own spouse, poor or sickly!”

She talks about rubies, pearls and silks, remnant of her royal life which she renounced for an austere life spent with the *sadhus* and among the marginalised communities like the weavers, leather workers and sweepers. She also talks about not coveting another person’s wealth or belonging, describing thus a true *Vaishnav*, similar in philosophy to *Vaishnav Janato*, a song which remained Gandhi’s most favourite *bhajan*. Non possession remained a strong value that Gandhi was attached to and in this his life drew a strong parallel with that of Mira’s. Quite early on in his life Gandhi cultivated poverty, he took a vow of poverty in South Africa and with time led a life of restricted individualism living in a community of people with shared values.

ASWADA

“The body was never meant to be treated as a refuse bin, holding all the foods that the palate demands,” Gandhi observed, for whom health was very clearly the only wealth that mattered. His experiments were far and deep in the complex area of food and nutrition. His quest was to look for the perfect food for a man to keep body, mind and soul in a healthy condition. Gandhi’s experiments and findings on food, diet and nutrition are like a handbook to the health conscious millions. Gandhi and Mira looked at food differently, for Mira food didn’t matter. “*Koi din Khaaja ne koi din ladoo, koi din phaakam phaka ji*” (some days you have feast and sweets and some days you have to fast), she says describing her state of complete surrender and renunciation. Mira’s outlook towards food may not be the solution for the millions of hungry Indians that Gandhi saw in his travels along the lengths and breadth of India. He has said that “there are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread”¹, but he also propounded that food should be seen as a source of energy or medicine and not to appease taste buds, suggesting moderation. In fact he considered fasting as a potent tool for health as much as eating nutritious food. Eating temperately has been professed by many saints and yogis. The 14th century Kashmiri saint Lalleshwari says, “Eat just enough to subdue your hunger”. In his writings on Yoga, Patanjali says “*Tat param purusa khyateh guna-vairagya*”, where he suggests that the highest stage of *vairagya* (renunciation) is achieved when there is contentedness with nature. He uses the word *vairagya* which means thirstless, signifying the end of desires. Mira in her songs says again and again that she thirsts for a *darshan* of Lord Krishna, *akhiyan shyama milan ko pyaasi* (my eyes thirst for a vision of the Lord) and in yet another *bhajan* she expresses the same feelings in the words *akhiyan tarshaan darsann pyaasi*. She is in essence the true *virahini* who thirsts only for her lover and thinks of nothing other than her Lord. She says, *dhaan na bhaave neend na aave* (food doesn’t appeal, sleep evades) referring to her sleepless and hunger less existence. Living the life of a *fakir*, she would have gone hungry on many days as she mentions in her own words. On the other hand, Gandhi viewed fasting as a means to see God face

¹ Thought for food: Mahatma’s views on Nutrition, controlled and balanced Diets, Subba Rao M and R. Hemalatha IJMR, Jan. 2019



to face by “crucifying the flesh”¹. He consciously made it a part of his diet and experimented endlessly on food, diet and fasting.

“My austerities, fastings and prayers are, I know, of no value if I rely upon them for reforming me. But they have an inestimable value, if they represent, as I hope they do, the yearnings of a soul striving to lay his weary head in the lap of its Maker,” said Gandhi as he expressed his views on fasting and prayers. He saw fasting as a means of self-restraint. He quoted from Chapter 2 of Bhagawad Gita thus,

“For a man who is fasting his senses
Outwardly, the sense-objects disappear,
Leaving the yearning behind; but when
He has seen the Highest,
Even the yearning disappears.”²

Mira had seen the highest for she says, “*Giridhar mharo sacho preetam, dekhath roop lubhavun. Jo pahirave son pahirun, jo de son khavun*” (my Lord is my true lover, I see His real form. I wear what He gives me and eat according to His wishes). She had truly left her yearnings behind. Her renunciation and devotion gave her access to Lord Krishna and she felt that pilgrimage and fasting were not necessarily the route to self-realisation. “*Kaah bhayo Theerath brath keenhe, kaha liye karvat kaasi*” (what lies in pilgrimage to Kashi and why do fasting?), she says referring to what now may be termed as temple tourism, underlying the futility of such travels. This was in tune with what her contemporaries such as Kabir and Nanak Dev said in their *bhajans* and *shabads*. Says Kabir, *Moko kahan dhoode re bande, main tho tere paas me* (where do thou look for me? I am within thee).

In one of her *bhajans*, Mira says, “*Jaai Preetam ji soo yoo Khai re thanri birahani dhaan na khaayi*” (Mirabai requests Cuckoo to go tell her Beloved that she was abstaining from eating, longing to meet her Beloved). For Mirabai, food was as immaterial as sleep, clothing or indeed shelter. She was drunk in her love and devotion to her Lord Krishna. Gandhi studied Mirabai’s *bhajans* and saw them through his own hermeneutic lens. As a result, his belief in self-denial was fortified and he practiced it passionately in the matter of food and fasting. He practiced *pradosha*³ and equally endorsed the Ramzan fast by his *Musalman* friends. Fasting was a means of self-restraint. He used it regularly to cleanse himself and at times to encourage reflection in the people around him while also believing that it would help him come face to face with God.

AHIMSA

By her own account Mira faced many forms of aggressions from her husband, mother-in-law and brother-in-law. In one of her creations, she says, “*jamda ki fauja aan padi hai*” (*the army of Death is knocking on my door, O Lord*), referring to her grave problems. She remained steadfast and determined even at the most trying moments of her life. She showed unwavering devotion for her *Ishta devata*, Lord Krishna. She disregarded the cards that she was dealt with and chose her own path with absolutely no signs of bitterness.

Mira says, “*Halee ree mhyaasoom Hari bin rahyo na jay*” (Sister! I cannot live without Hari, the Lord who destroys sorrow. Let mother-in-law scold me! Let sister-in-law tease me! Let brother-in-law, the Rana be angry with me! Let my door be bolted and a guard kept outside! How can I give up my love for the Lord carried over from previous births?). Mira sang with equanimity proclaiming her love for her Lord refusing any alliance with her human husband. In the medieval Rajput state with its strong patriarchal biases, such an act

1 M.K Gandhi H, 10-12-1938, p. 373

2 विषया विनिवर्तन्ते निराहारस्य देहिनः । रसवर्जं रसोऽप्यस्य परं दृष्ट्वा निवर्तते ॥ 59॥

3 a fasting vow performed bi monthly





by a woman, was totally unheard of. In response, the society mercilessly sidelined her. Mira's compositions give us a glimpse of her subalternity status and how stoic she remained against all the pressures from her husband, brother-in-law, sister-in-law and even the society at large. At a time when Rajput women were the safe keepers of *kul maryada* (clan's reputation), Mira chose to walk out of her family and society in search of her divine love. *Bhooshan bastar sabhi hum tyagen*, she says referring to her comfortable life which she leaves behind. She roamed around in anguish walking through the jungles, in vain. She says, "*Ajahoo na mile Raam avinasi, ban ban beech phiroom re*" (My Lord eludes me while I walk through jungles in search of Him). By completely refusing to legitimise her marriage just because that was the diktat of *stridharma*, she stood up to her own beliefs and aspirations. That she left her marriage for Lord Krishna softened the blow. She was still called names. She says, "*Log kahe bhayi Meera bavaro, naati kahe kul naasi re*" (I am called mad while my loved ones accuse me of destroying the family name). She didn't take a step back, undeterred she kept singing the glory of her Lord. She says, "*Hari guna gavat nachungi, prabhu guna gaveta nachungi*", taking the name of Lord, dancing in ecstasy. Her strength came from her devotion to Lord Krishna without which she says she is a powerless woman, "*Mai abalaa bal naay gusaaiee, tum hee mere sirtaaj*" (I am a powerless woman and you are my protector). She invited the Lord to take charge of her, "*Mangasar thand bahoti parai mohee begi samhalo ho*" (In the month of *Margasira*, when it is cold come and take charge of me), she says. Her *bhajans* mirror her mind which is uncluttered and in complete focus, like the proverbial fish eye and Arjuna. Her resolute refusal to align with her husband, in-laws and the society at large was the source of inspiration for Gandhi's non-cooperation movement. Mirabai's way of dealing with hegemony strengthened his belief in the idea of non-cooperation movement. Her words in one of her *bhajans*, "*asuvan jal seench seench prem beli boyi*" (made a tree of love out of welled tears), may have had a huge impact on the peace loving Gandhi.

SARVA DHARMA SAMANATVA

The Bhagwad Gita says that a self realised soul sees all with an equal eye. "A brahmin, a cow, elephant, dog or a *chandal* are all regarded equally".¹ If this is the definition of *samadarshi*, Mirabai was one. Caste, colour, gender, *varnas* didn't matter to her. "What is *Kulam* or lineage, heritage or inheritance? What is the meaning of the division amongst devotees as Kshatriyas and Brahmanas and shudras and the like? Who is man and who is woman? Krishna is the only Purusha and all of us are women. He is Pati and we are all Pasus. I am no more Queen than you are King. There is only one King and my life belongs to him." Mirabai is said to have replied to Rana Sanga thus when he called her back promising to restore her position as the queen. Mirabai was referring to the idea of *purusha-prakriti*, the only *Purusha* being the Lord Himself. Mirabai lived at a time when factions had not started to appear between the Hindus and the Muslims, the society was divided more on the basis of the Varna system. Whereas during Gandhi's time, the Hindu Muslim divide was at its peak leading to the partition.

"Should we not remember that many Hindus and Mahomedans own the same ancestors and the same blood runs through their veins? Do people become enemies because they change their religion? Is the God of the Mahomedan different from the God of the Hindu? Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarrelling?"² Gandhi argued that there was no inborn enmity between Hindus and Muslims, he blamed the British for the gulf that had formed between the two. And yet his behaviour with the British may be described as courteous. He was a huge believer of values such as patience, perseverance, nobility and compassion. The tolerance and equanimity with which Gandhi faced the tyranny of the British rule may be compared to the nonchalant ease of Mirabai in facing her brother in law's ire. In one of her popular *bhajans* she gives an insight

1 Chapter V.18 Bhagawad Gita

2 Hind Swaraj, 1938,p.46



into the extremes her family went to finish her life, she recounts dispassionately, bearing no bitterness, “*Vish ka pyaala Ranaji ne bheja, peevat Mira haasi re*” (Rana sent poison, which Mira drank with a smile). Both Mira and Gandhi were *samadarshis*, believing in the power of non-violence and in Eknath Eashwaran’s words, aflame with love. Since Gandhi was a national leader at the forefront of the Indian freedom movement, being a *samadarshi* translated into believing in justice for all. Mira was neither an untouchable nor a low caste woman. And so, when she defied caste hierarchy, the orthodox and the establishment had to pay attention. That a woman was opposing these values made it all the more unpalatable for the establishment and so she was vilified and marginalised.

It may be argued that both Mira and Gandhi worked towards the same cause, one for her personal freedom (*Mukti*) and the other for the freedom of the nation. Both did it with compassion and equanimity.

FINDINGS

Could Gandhi’s eleven vows have been influenced by Mirabai’s *bhajans*?

Mira’s *bhajans* have been studied and analysed using epistemic logic. If there are traces of the Gandhian eleven vows in Mirabai’s *bhajans*, it may be argued that Gandhi may have been influenced by Mira, as Mira predated Gandhi.

Truth

In the bhajan “*Payoji maine Raam ratan dhan payo*” Mirabai says that she has found Lord Rama by following the path of Truth that her Guru led. By chanting Rama naam with a pure heart and a steadfast mind, Mira says that she has merged with the Truth. *Sat kee naav, kevatia satguru*, she says using the metaphor of Truth as the boat that takes one across the ocean of life.

‘What is perceived by a pure heart and intellect is truth for that moment. Cling to it, and it enables one to reach pure Truth’. Said Gandhi ¹. Mirabai was a true example of a practitioner who clung to her Truth.

Non possession

In *Mhane chaakar rakho jee*, she makes a reference to wearing *kasumbi* saree, a clear indication of someone who had moved towards renunciation and non-possession.

In *karuna Sun Shyam meri*, she says that she has become a *jogan* on account of attaining Him. Jogan is someone who is steeped in *Yog* and one who has given up the material life. In *Ramaiya bin yau*, she talks about being in the company of *sadhu*, which points to a life of non-possession and minimalism.

In *ik araj suno Piya mori*, Mirabai makes many references of renunciation such as giving up silk sarees, jewellery, tilak and betal leaf, the last two symbolic of neutralising the physical appearance.

In *Yeh vidhi Bhagati raise hoy*, she makes a plea to her Lord that He make her *viragya* easy for her. *Vairagya* means giving up, detachment or dispassion.

In *mharo janam maran ko sathi*, Mirabai says, *yo sansar sakal jag jhooto*, which amplifies the fact that she was far removed from the material world. She personified non possession as seen by Gandhi

Control of palette

In *ghadi ek nahi aavde*, Mira expresses her intense longing to meet her Lord saying that she has lost her appetite and sleep over her Lord when she says, *dhaan na bhav neend na aavai* and in *Mira man maani*, she

¹Harijan, February 22, 1942

says, *neend na aavat bhavat anna na paani*. *Birahini*, a word used to depict the pain of separation of a woman from her husband, she says *thari birahini dhaan na khaayi in papiya re piv kee baani*.

Celibacy

In *Hari piy bin laage khari*, she says that she is waiting for her Lord, and has been over several her births, remaining *kuvari*. She says that she has dedicated her body, mind and soul to Lord Krishna in the *bhajan ya Mohan ke mai roop lubhani*. Without Him, she says her body is not hers, *mira re prabhu saware re the vin deh videh* in the *bhajan, nagar nandkumar*.

Fearlessness

The mere fact that Mira chose the life of a wandering devotee shows her fearlessness. The consequences of exercising her choice comes through in many of her *bhajans* as she faces them boldly. In *Matwari badal*, she refers to *kaari andhiyaari bijli* and *kaali naag* as a metaphor for the hard life of a *birahini*. In *mai Govind guna gasya*, one can experience her utter indifference to the disapproval of her husband or indeed the town. She also exhibits agency and courage when she announces that Lord Krishna is her husband, *jake sir mor mukut mero pati soyi* (*He who sports a peacock feather on his forehead is my husband*).

Equality of religion and Untouchability

One of the best examples of equality comes in the form of her *bhajan, acche meethe chakh ber* where she references the episode of the Bhilni who belonged to a low caste but won the love of Lord Rama. She describes the Bhilni as low caste and of lowly clan, not attractive physically (and of questionable character (*kuchelani*) but she knew how to love Hari (*Hari jyu so bandhyo heth*). In this *bhajan*, she describes her Lord as *Patita pavan*, purifier and restorer of the fallen reminiscent of the *Ramdhun, Raghupati Raghav Rajaram* where Lord Rama is described as *Patita Pavan*.

In *swami sab sansaar ke* her devotion seems to steer towards the formless. She says that for the Lord everything is equal and that she sees Him in everything.

The following table gives a list of Mira 's *bhajans* that make references to Gandhian ideologies as seen in his eleven vows. One hundred and fifty *bhajans* have been studied and classified on the basis of their references to twelve of the following Gandhian ideologies as listed in the table.

Table 1: Shows the Vows 1 to 4 and the *sthayis* (initial phrase of a composition) of the *bhajans* that reflect these vows

Truth	Non cooperation/Defiance	Non possession	Non stealing
Payo ji maine raam ratan dhan payo	Shree Giridhar Aage nachungi	Mhane chaakar rakho jee Giridhari lal	
	Meera magan bhayi Hari ke guna gaay	Karuna suni Shyam meri	
		Ramaiya bin yau jivdau dukh paavai	
	Mai tho giridhar ke ghar javun	Aavat mori galian me Giridhari	
	Mai Govind gun gasya	Ik araj sono più mori mai kin sung khelum holi	
	Mere tho giridhar Gopal doosro na koi	Yeh viddhi Bhagati kaise hoy	
	Naaton savaron ree maso	Main janyo nahi Prabhu ko Milan kaise hoy ree	
	Holi mhasun Hari bin rahyo na jaay	Rana ji hun ab na rehungi tori hatke	
	Tero koyi nahen rokanhaar	Mharo Janam maran ko sathi	

Table 2: Shows the vows 5 to 8 with the *sthayis* of Meera *bhajans* reflecting each of these vows

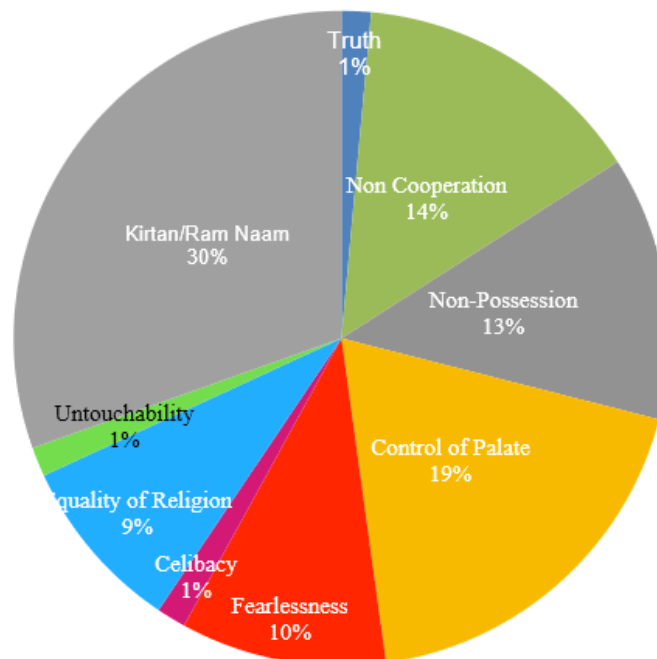
Control of palate/fasting	Physical labour	Fearless ness	Swadeshi
Mai apne saiyya sang saachi (divas bhook na chain)		Pag ghunghroo bandh Meera nachi re	
Naatho saavaro ree mhasu (chhane langhan)		Main apne saiyya sang saachi	
Ghadi ik nahi aavade tum darsan bin mohe		Meera magan bhayi Hari ke gun gaay	
Papiya re piv kee baani na bol		Mai tho giridhar ke ghar javun	
Mai tho giridhar ke ghar javun		Mai Govind gun gasyo	
Oodho main bairagan Hari kee		Jogi mat ja mat ja mat ja	
Pyare Darshan deejyo aay			
Naaton savaron ree maso			
Ghadi ek nahi aavade tum darsan bin moy			
Meera man maani surat sail asmaani			
Papiya re piy kee baani na bol			
Ab nahi bisroo mhare hardy			

Table 3: shows vows 9 to 12 with *sthayis* of the Mira *bhajan* reflecting each of the vow

Celibacy	Equality of religion	Untouchability	Bhajan/Satsang/Raam Naam
Nagar Nand kumar lagyo tharo neh	Acche meethe chaakh chaakh ber laayi bheelni	Acche meethe chaakh chaakh ber laayi bheelni	Mai tho saavare ke rang raachi
Hari piy bin laage khaki suno re sakhi meri pyaari	Swami sab sansaar ke saache shri Bhagwan		Meera magan bhayi Hari ke guna gaay
	Maai mhari Hari na boojhi baat		Raana jee Giridhar ra gun gaasyon
	Maayi mhari Hari na boojhi baath		Mero man Ram hee Ram rate re
	Thane kaayi kaayi kahi samjhavun		Mhane chaakar rakho jee Giridhari lal
			Meera magan bhayi Hari ke guna gaay
			Balha mai bairagin hoongi
			Nahi aiso Janam barambar
			Param sandhi Ram kee nith olun ree aavei
			Mere tho giridhar Gopal

			Payoji Maine Ram Ratan dhan paayo
			Ram naam ras peeje manuva
			Yahi biddhi Bhagati raise hoye
			Baraji mai kaahu kee nahi rahun
			Mere man ram naam basi
			Aaj mhare sadhu jan no sang re
			Ab nahi bisroo mhare hirdey
			Lage rehna lage rehna Hari bhajan
			Leta leta Ram naam re lokadiyan
			Rana ji hun ab na rehungi tori hatke

Out of 150 bhajans that were studied, 69 had clear reference to one or more of the eleven vows of Gandhi. It was interesting to note that there were 21 *bhajans* out of the 69 where Mira made a clear reference to the idea of *satsang* and *Raam Naam Japa*. Control of palate, *Ram Naam* or *kirtan* and non-cooperation or defiance are the top three values which recur in the 150 sampled Mira *bhajans* and add up to 63% of the total. Non possession and fearlessness are next most commonly found values adding up to 23%. 9% of her *bhajans* show that she moved in social groups that were not caste or class conscious thus indicating equality of religions.



Gandhian values in Mira Bhajans

While she was in search of the eternal Truth, there were very few instances where she spoke about Truth as a virtue. She simply praised it. Similarly, references of celibacy, non-violence, physical labour and untouchability were few and far between. The sampled *bhajans* are from Prannath Pankaj's book¹.

¹ Avinasi Giridhar ki Mira, Prannath Pankaj

What was the significance of the nine *bhajans* chosen in the ashram *bhajanavali*?

The table below enlists the *bhajans* from the *bhajanavali* with the corresponding vows on the basis of the key words found in each of the nine *bhajans*.

SN	Bhajan	Vow	Key words
1	Payo ji maine Rama ratan dhan payo	Truth	Sat kee naav
2	Mohi laag latak guru charanan kee	Non-possession	Jag maya sab sapnan
3	Nahin aisa janam barambar	Non-possession	Sadhu sant mahant gyani Chalat karat pukaar
4	Mere to Giridhar Gopal	Non-possession	Jag chodya, bandhu Chodya, chodya sagha
5	Mere rana ji mai Govind guna gana	Fearlessness	Dabiya me kaala naag Bheja, mai shaligram Kar jaana
6	Hari! Tūm Haro jan kee peer	Renunciation	Draupadi kee laaj rakhyo Tum badhayo cheer
7	Mhane chakar rakho jee	non possession	Pahir kasumbi saree
8	Mayi Maine Govind Leno mol	Equality	Mira ke prabhu aavat Premke dol
9	Raam naam ras peeje	Rama naam, non-possession, celibacy	Raam naam Kaam krodh madh lobh mohkun

Each of the nine *bhajans* in the *Bhajanavali* is significant for the values it depicts. There are multiple references to chanting and *japa* of *Ram naam* and being in the company of *sadhus* and *sant*. “*Sadhu sung baith baith Lok laaj khoyi*” (mingling with sadhus, I have done away with shame), she says clearly making her choices and displaying the fearlessness in exercising her choices. She says, “*fikar nahi mujhe tarnanki*” (I am not worried) or “*jo honi hoy so hoy*” (let whatever happen) in many *bhajans*. She also makes a reference to her quest for Truth, comparing a boat to Truth and the boatman to Guru. Her simplicity and austerity come to the fore again and again where she says that she only wears ‘*Kasumbi*’ coloured saree where *Kasumb* is a flower which has a strong dye but perishes when touched. The flower signifies the cycle of life and death. The last of the nine Meera *bhajans* in the *Bhajanavali* is significant for it packs most of the Gandhian values in it. “*Ram naam ras peeje manua ram naam ras peeje*” (O mind! Drink the nectar of the Lord’s name) makes a strong argument for chanting the name of Rama in the company of similar minded devotees and advocates shunning *kama*, *krodha*, *mada*, *lobha* and *moha* which translate into desire, anger, intoxication, greed and infatuation.

WHAT INSPIRATIONS DID GANDHI GET FROM MIRA’S LIFE?

The Sabarmati *ashram bhajanavali* compilation has nine *bhajans* of Mirabai as part of the daily prayers. The first of them is *Payoo Jee Maine Rama Ratan Dhan Payoo* (I have obtained the wealth of diamonds that is Rama), a reminder to all that the chanting of *Ram naam* is the foremost route to attaining the Almighty. She pleads that all should take to chanting His name, ‘*Vastu Amoulik Dee Mhare Satguru, Kirpa kar Apnaayo*’,

she says. Mira devoted her whole life to singing, composing songs and chanting Lord's name. *Ram naam* was also the single most powerful mantra internalised by Gandhi which he practiced until his last breath. He was introduced to chanting the mantra of Rama by his caregiver Rambha when he was a child, to dispel his fear. He worked on this much later in his life in South Africa as he began his work in non-violent non-cooperation. He began chanting Rama, silently and loudly. He chanted to coordinate it with his body movements and soon it became a parallel thought process in his mind no matter what else he was doing. For Mira, chanting the name of Krishna was in the form of the *bhajans* she sang. Mira known for her *bhajans* on Krishna also invoked Rama just as eloquently. In one of her *bhajans* she refers to chanting *Ram naam* and the benefits thereof "*Mero Man Ram hee Rama rate re*" (Mind recites the name of Rama ceaselessly. When you recite the name of Rama, a million sins are destroyed). Gandhi couldn't have agreed more. Gandhi was a great believer in chanting and *bhajans* which is clear from the fact that prayers, *bhajans* and chanting were an intrinsic part of his ashram life. Gandhi's *Rama japa* and Mira *ke prabhu* have helped them stay focussed in their pursuits.

Gandhi also believed that *Ram naam* at once mediated between one and the many, the Hindus and the Muslims. Talking about *Ram naam*, "it is the relationship between unity and plurality", says Dr Anuradha Veeravalli in her book¹. In fact, Dr Anuradha goes to the extent of saying that Mira's *bhajan* "*Payo jee Maine Ram Ratan dhan payo*" may have actually originally been "*Payo jee Maine Naam Ratan dhan payo*", the usage of the word '*naam*' in lieu of Ram. The ashram *bhajanavali* mentions "*Ram Ratan*" in the text, while the rest of the *bhajan* has no further attributes of Lord Rama in His physical form. In the same *bhajan*, Mira mentions Truth as, "*Sat kee Naav khevatiya Satguru*" (Truth is the boat and boatman, my guru), implying that Truth is God and that she has found Him. Here, the name of the specific God is immaterial. Mira may have mastered what the Western philosophers call ascetic-phenomenology, she had a deep insight into the essence of what she called Krishna not based on any empirical studies and her moral standing was rock solid, unshakeable. Whereas, Gandhi worked towards an ascetic neutrality in order to be better aware of himself and possibly find God. He had not found God. He remained in pursuit of Truth. For him, God and Truth were synonyms. He also said that, "in our endeavour to approach absolute truth we shall always have to be content with relative truth from time to time." He strived to reach a Mira-like state of absolute conviction and come face to face with God. "I have not found him but I am seeking after him", he said, while Mira says, "*ha tho vaako neeke janu, Kunj ke Bihari*". Beloved's look is like the dagger of love, I am intoxicated, she says, clearly referring to her vision of Lord. Gandhi had inherited *Ram Ratan Dhan* from Mirabai.

In many *bhajans* in the *Bhajanavali*, Mira makes references to what Gandhi would call an ashramite life. She says, "*sadhu sant mahant gyani chalat karat pukaar*" (I heed to the calls of Sadhus, spiritual leaders and the evolved) and "*sadhu sung baith baith lok laaj khoyi*" (Mingling with Sadhus and saints, I have left my shyness behind), reinforcing her love for a life with the like-minded, in a *sangha*. She is known to have spent most of her days in temples dedicated to Krishna in the company of pilgrims, sadhus and holy men. In one of her *bhajans*, she says, "*seva karasya sadhu kee mhare aur na doojo kaam*" (no greater job than performing service for Sadhus). After multiple attempts which were made on her life, she left Mewar and went back to Merta just a hundred kilometres away. This was also her birthplace. It's ironic that this place now houses a museum that documents her life, but back then she was made to feel unwelcome and so she left for Dwarka, which lies in west Gujarat where she spent the rest of her life. Her own *bhajans* give us a glimpse of her life as a mendicant who lived a life similar to other saints of her times - austere, devoted, free spirited and unattached to domesticity. Furthermore, she firmly believed in spiritual mobility and social equality. She makes a reference to Shabari as a low caste devotee who manages to find her place in heaven. *Neech kul occhi jaa at hee kucheelni*, she says about Shabari. While there is no evidence in the chronicles or biographies of her living in

¹ Gandhi in Political Theory: Truth, Law and Experiment, Dr Anuradha Veeravalli, Ashgate 2014



a formal ashram, her *bhajans* imply that she spent time with the like-minded saints, devotees and *bhaktas* of her times who may have belonged to any caste. She herself did not believe in birth determined social standing, mingling freely with the low caste. In fact, there is a unit of her followers called Mirabais who imitate and recreate her life by composing songs in praise of Lord Krishna, living and dressing like her, eating what is handed out to them by the charitable funds of Mewar which may be traced back to the 17th century. Mira's life was certainly an example of simplicity, comfortable in poverty, detachment and of living in *Satsangs* singing songs in praise of Krishna as a way to self realisation. Gandhi associated these very principles to *ashramic* life. For him, the principles of ashram life rested on, "rigid simplicity, constant continence, voluntary poverty, detachment from the world and formation of character with a view to self realisation"¹. From various accounts and in Gandhi's own words, his ashram required a lot of time and effort from him to maintain the discipline that he had set out to establish in the inhabitants led by him. While the idea of an *ashram* or a cooperative living could have come from any source that Gandhi had studied but the idea of renouncing and living a life of forced poverty certainly mirrored Mira's own life.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis it is clear that control of palette and non-violent non-cooperation are the two values that were seen in Mira's *bhajans* repeatedly. The other more important finding is the recurring theme of chanting or *japa* of Rama *naam* which she prescribes as a panacea of all ills. Gandhi believed immensely in the power of *mantric* recitations and its extraordinary power in self-purification. This paper posits that *naam japa* was a key learning from Mira's *bhajans* and may well have strengthened Gandhi's belief in chanting, *satsangs* and *japa*.

Gandhi's love for music and belief in prayers as a tool to inspire, motivate and elevate the spiritual make up of people can be seen by the choice of songs that form a part of Sabarmati *ashram bhajanavali*. The fact that Mirabai's voice is an integral part of this sacred collection is proof of Gandhi's faith in her philosophy of chanting the name of God and singing as a way to spiritual upliftment. Gandhi often quoted *bhajans* from *bhajanavali* when he was either teaching or training someone. "He often spoke to the current conflicts using anecdotes and verses from the *Ashram Bhajanavali* to teach right conduct and to bolster non-violence. Using quotations from the Upanishads, from Guru Nanak, Mirabai, and Kabir, etc he sought to teach non-violence" says Cynthia Snodgras. In her paper², she mentions that Gandhi quoted Mirabai's songs fifteen times as part of his teachings. *Japa* or chanting Rama *naam* and leading a disciplined ashram life were the two top activities that Gandhi actively applied in his own life and that of the ashram citizens. These were most certainly borrowed from Mira's own life. On 30th January 1948, foreseeing his death, Gandhi said to his grandniece Manu, "if someone fires bullets at me and I die without a groan and with God's name on my lips, then you shall tell the world that here was a real *Mahatma*..." The *Mahatma* certainly swam in *sabad-sarovar* (the ocean of Lord's name), a phrase Mira uses to describe her devotion and attachment to *japa*.

The Mahatma aspired to be in the state of bliss that Mira was in - being in complete control of one's palate and senses, intoxicated in one's devotion and chanting His name ceaselessly. He was a serious student of religion and theology with an indomitable spiritual quest. Gandhi believed renunciation was not the only way to moksha and yet he was attracted to the idea. He believed that God could not be reached through abstinences and yet he included *Aswada* and *Brahmacharya* as part of his eleven vows. Even though he was a *Karmayogi*, he was attracted to the life of a *bhakti* yogi and perhaps that is why he imbibed Mira's values and philosophies

1 Gandhi and his Ashrams, Mark Thomson, page 46

2 The sounds of satyagraha: Mahatma Gandhi's use of sung-prayers and ritual, Cynthia Snodgras



in all the ways that he could. It would be fair to say that Mirabai had a huge role to play in Gandhi's journey of an ordinary man to Mahatma through the route of *Bhajans*, chanting and *japa*.

Lyrics of the bhajans from the Ashram bhajanavali:

1. Payo ji maine Raam ratan dhan paayo

Vastu amolik dee mhare satguru
Kirapa kar apanayo
Janam Janam kee poonji paayi
Jag me sabhi khovayo
Kharchai na khoontai vaako chor na lootai
Din din badhat savaayo
Sat kee naav khevatiya Satguru
Bhavnagar tar aayo
Mira ke prabhu Giridhar nagar
Harakh harakh jas gaayo

2. Mohi laag lat guru charnankee

Charan bina muhe kacha nahi Bhave
Jag Maya sab sapnankee
Bhavsagar sab sookh gaya hai
Fikar nahi mujhe tarnanki
Mira kahe Parbhu Giridhar naagar
Ulat bhayi more nayananki

3. Nahi aiso Janam barambar

Kya jaanu kachu puny prakate manusa avatar
Badhat pal pal, ghatat chin chin , chalat na laage baar
Birchke jyo part toot laage nahi puni daar
Sadhu sant mahant gyaan chalat karat pukar
Daasi Mira lal Giridhar Jeevan din chaar

4. Mere to Giridhar Gopal Doosaro na koi

Doosara na koi, sad, sakal Lok joyi
Bhagat dekh raaji huyi jagat dekh royi
Asuvan jal seench seench Prem beli boyi
Ab tho baat fail padi jaane sab koi
Mira em Lagan lag honi hoy so hoyi

5. Mere Rana ji mai Govind Goon gaana

Raaja roothe nagari rakkhe apni
Mai Har rootya kaha jaana?
Mirabai Prem divaani
Mai davalaya var plana

6. Hari! Tum Haro janki Bheer

Draupadi kee laaj raakhi, tum badhayo cheer

Bhakti kaaran roop narahari
Dharyo aap shareer
Daasi Mira laal Giridhar
Dukh jahan tahan peer

7. Mhane chakar Rakho jee

Giridhari laal! Chaakar rakho ji
Chaakar rahsun, baag lagaasun, nit uth darsan paasun
Vrindavan kee kunt galigaan me Govind Leela gaasun
Mira ke prabhu gahir gambheera, hriday rahyo jee dheera
Aadhiraat prabhu darsan deenho jamunajee ke teera

8. Maayi maine Govind leeno mol Govind Leeno mol
Koi kahe sasta , koi kahe mehanga, leeno taraju tol
Koi kahe gharne koi kahe ban me, Radha ke sang khilol
Mira ke Prabhu Giridhar nagar aavat premke dol

9. Rama naam ras peeje, manua Rama Naam ras peejai

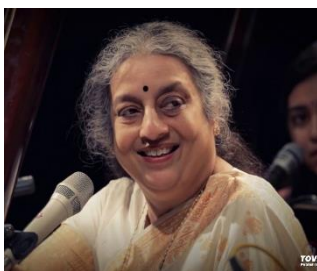
Taj kusang sat sant baith nith, Hari charcha suni leejai
Kaam krodh mad lobe mohku, haha chitso deejay
Mira ke prabhu Giridhar Naagar, taahi ke rang me bheejai

Appendix

Links to the recording of the Mira *bhajans* found in the Ashram bhajanavali, Payo ji maine Raam ratan dhan by Pt. Venkatesh kumar
<https://youtu.be/STMk3vvbVMM?si=ptNqYwLW8k3KWgJn>

Mero to giridhar gopal doosro na koi by M.S Subbulakshmi <https://youtu.be/dHIwRudLCJs?si=DpvS8Mcg2MpK2E9c>

Hari tum haro jan kee bheer by Vid. M.S Subbulakshmi <https://youtu.be/kCzxL5RMjUA?si=nHoVQRUc3PkYuYym>



Mere Rana ji mai Govind gun gaana
by Vid Ashwini Bhide



Maayi maine Govind leeno mol by
Begum Parveen Sultana



Mhane chaakar rakho ji by Vid.
Sunanda Sharma



Ram naam ras peeje by Pt
D.V Paluska

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