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Brindavan to Dwaraka — Meera's pilgrimage

The making of ``Meera" was studded with interesting incidents. `Kalki' Krishnamurti, who wrote the script and a few of the immortal songs, accompanied the crew and recorded the episodes. Excerpts, translated by GOWRI RAMNARAYAN.



``Meera" ...wherever M.S. went people thought she was the incarnation of Meerabai.

PRINCESS MEERA longed to wed Krishna, the divine trickster, who had stolen her heart in childhood. Against her will, she was compelled to marry the Maharana of Chittor. M. S. Subbulakshmi faced no such constraint. Given a choice of two or three scripts, she insisted on playing the role of Meera. Her own will and choice were responsible for her undergoing almost all the sufferings of Meera herself.

Is it so easy then to play Meerabai? Can one visualise Moore market as Brindavan, the Cooum as the Yamuna, and express Meera's mystic ardours? ``I will go to all those places where Meera wandered in search of the elusive Krishna. I will worship at all the holy

temples she worshipped. Only then can I play the part with the soul of Meera herself." Who could oppose the leading star in this resolve? Meanwhile director Ellis. R. Dungan had thoroughly assimilated the thousand pages of "Rajasthan." He studied the history and culture of the Rajputs, down to the colour of the bangles worn by

Rajput maidens on their wedding day. "We must certainly go to the North," he declared. "To be credible and historically accurate, we must shoot on actual locations in Rajasthan, and in the sacred spots of Brindavan and Dwaraka. Otherwise the film will not have the ring of truth." The "Meera" pilgrimage began on an auspicious day. A 20-member crew including Subbulakshmi, Radha (who played child Meera), director Dungan and cameraman Jiten added to the heavy wartime rush on trains. The team landed first in Brindavan, young Krishna's playground. On day one Subbulakshmi led a group of bhajan singers through the streets singing "Brindavan ki mangal lila." So strong was its spell that, for days on end the song resounded from the highlanes and bylanes, and from every street corner of Brindavan.

Grim situation

The leading lady faced a grim, real life trial when she enacted Meera's attempt to drown herself in the Yamuna, to escape the woes of the world. Whatever it may have been in the past, today the Yamuna is home to vast herds of giant turtles, a fearful sight. Before plunging into the river, the heroine had to put her trust in the Lord who saved the elephant from the crocodile's jaws. Meera's Giridhara Gopal saves her in the guise of a boatman. But the very boat meant to rescue her became a threat to Subbulakshmi's life. As she rose above the waves, her head hit the boat, and was pushed under water. Surely the same Blue God who rescued the legendary Meera, protected the illustrious singer from the south.

From Brindavan the "Meera" crew reached Jaipur, famed for the beauty of its streets and mansions. One can gaze tirelessly at the rows of dwellings, marvel at their exquisitely designed, ruby-tinted frontage. Eight miles away from the city stands an old springtime mansion at the Purana Ghat. It is not easy to describe the beauty of the ornamental mandapas surrounding the large garden which skirts this mansion. Nor is it necessary, as their splendours can be seen in the film. Meera sits by the marble pool and strolls in the garden, singing of the magic flute which had enchanted her from childhood.

The wife of Sir Mirza Ismail, Diwan of Jaipur, and other Rajput women from aristocratic families, came to the shoot, and stayed through the day to enjoy Meera's songs. Some of them helped Subbulakshmi to wear her costume and ornaments in the authentic way. Without exception everyone asked, "Why are you making this film in the Madrasi language? Why not in Hindi?"

The "Meera" team next went to the historic city of Chittor. Its hill fort is a grand memorial to Rajput glory. The fort had thrice been the target of ferocious attack by the Mughals. Each time the brave warriors and the valiant women within had fought until death. Not a single individual had surrendered to save his skin. Those massive walls and its seven famous portals, as also the grand palaces and mansions within, lie in ruins now. Among the ruins a single structure stands unscathed, its loveliness undimmed. This is the Krishna shrine built by the Rana of Chittor for Meerabai, to grant her request during the (happy) days of their married life before he turned against her. When Subbulakshmi sat in the Lord's sanctum and sang the songs of Meera, every one of us had the same thought: Meerabai had sung the same songs from the same spot in rapturous devotion! M.S. shed tears as she sang. Everyone had moist eyes. Most remarkable was the sight of the old, half blind temple priest, going off into a sudden trance, clapping his

hands in rhythm to Meera's songs.

From Chittor the crew went to Udaipur. When foes destroyed their fort, the Mewar royals left Chittor and established a new capital, surrounded by hills on all four sides. Even today, there is only a single route to the city, through a single tunnel on the hillside. Roads and railway tracks have to pass through it. The huge wrought iron portals are locked at sunset and opened at dawn, so that Udaipur can be visited only at day time. None can enter it at night, not even trains. In that elegant city, Meera and her royal spouse were filmed as they sailed happily on the clear blue waters of the lake.

In one of the pleasure gardens of Udaipur, fountains spray water from all sides, a shower of pearls on a lotus pool. Elephants at the four corners squirting water through their trunks make an entrancing spectacle. The film shows Meera, lost to the world, wandering beside the pool and the fountains. It was felt that some footage of the famous procession of elephants should be included in the film. It was no easy matter to get the Maharana's permission. Subbulakshmi gave a concert for the Maharana. Not only did the Maharana applaud her Carnatic and Hindustani music, but announced that every assistance would be given to the ``Meera" crew. And the procession of Udaipur elephants became part of the film.

After many wanderings in search of the Lord who stole her heart, Meerabai finally reaches Dwaraka where she obtains grace and becomes one with him. The ``Meera" unit ended its pilgrimage in Dwaraka. When Subbulakshmi went down the streets of Dwaraka, chanting the glorious names of Krishna, there were more intense action replays of the scenes in Brindavan. Huge crowds followed her wherever she went, convinced that she was Meerabai reborn. Many started offering worship to her. Dissuading them was a herculean task. When Meera went up the steps and into the temple, and entered the sanctum with a cry, Subbulakshmi fell at the feet of the Lord in a real swoon. A thrilling climax indeed! Sure to transport viewers to ecstasy.

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