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Saga of an Indian princess in Mexico

IANS [SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2003 01:30:03 PM]

NEW DELHI: An Indian princess is kidnapped, sold in the slave market and ferried across the seas to serve as a slave in Mexico -- but becomes a source of veneration and is almost beatified as a saint.

This is not fiction. This is the story of Princess Meera, alias Catharina de San Juan alias China Poblana, one of those unfortunate Indians to be enslaved and taken abroad more than three centuries before India gained independence. It was when Spanish conquistadors and Portuguese sailors ruled the seas.

Hundreds of thousands of Indians were transported overseas by the Dutch, French, Portuguese and English colonialists, to work in sugar farms, tea gardens and elsewhere where they remained to become the 20-million strong Indian diaspora spread across 110 countries.

Meera's story, compiled from three hagiographic treatises written by Jesuit priests determined to beatify her, is part of 14 articles by prominent historians, philosophers, anthropologists and scientists from India and Mexico in a book *India-Mexico: Similarities and encounters throughout history*.

The book, edited by Eva Alexandra Uchmany of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, has published the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) and highlights the fascinating similarities between India and Mexico. The two countries are situated on opposite ends of the globe and inheritors of "prosperous and autonomous civilizations".

The article on Meera -- "la China Poblana: Indian princess, slave, married yet virgin, beatified yet condemned" -- is by Augustir Grajales Porras of the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities Meritorius University of Puebla.

Translated into English, *la China Poblana* means the Chinese girl of Puebla, but the author says the term "China" does not refer to continental China, but to the Philippines. "In fact, whatever came from the Orient received the generic name of Chinese."

Meera's heart-rending story, as narrated by her to her Jesuit confessors, traces her origin "in some place in Rajasthan and probably also in Gujarat... in the bosom of a princely family".

"For her part, Meera remembers that her father was the lord of a certain principality, and, besides, a physician and seer, who knew how to quieten the tempests. In these remembrances of hers distant and blurred, Meera categorises her parent as much as belonging to the ruling caste or Kshatriya or to that of the priests or Brahmins."

One day, as a 11 or 12-year-old, Meera was walking with her brother, when they were kidnapped by a band of pirates, who set sail "towards Cochin, on the Malabar coast, a city where the Portuguese had a pepper factory and a fort", and where she was



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By Ajit Ninan

sold as a slave.

In Cochin, she was evangelised and baptised by the Jesuits, who gave her a Christian name.

"The name given to me at the baptismal font was Catharina de San Joan," she told in her confession to Father Jose del Castillo Graxeda many years later.

After her stay in Cochin, her captors took her to various ports and finally to Manila. She had to endure mistreatment and was subjected to "cruel imprisonment".

But it was in Manila that her first encounter with "Divine Father" took place. While taking part in a procession of penitents, carrying crosses on their shoulders, she saw an image of "Jesus of Nazareth and she heard a voice telling her: 'I will be your Father'". She had several similar visions later in life.

She arrived in Acapulco in May 1621, with several slaves and was bought by a rich merchant in Puebla, where she lived the rest of her hard life and died at the age of 82.

Though she married a fellow slave it was on the condition of "separation of beds with pillows and crucifixes". Finally, her husband left in frustration, but her confessors considered her "sacred vow of chastity" as another proof of her saintliness.

"The relationship between her and Domingo gave again a cause to Fathers Graxeda and Ramos, her confessors and biographers, so that they could add fresh arguments on the predestined beatitude and virtuosity of Meera alias Catharina de San Juan."

Catharina died a slave in 1688 after endless suffering. "At the hour of her death she was nearly paralytic because she suffered from respiratory complications and at the same time she was ridden by other diseases. The diseases were as much due to her age as because of her unfortunate difficult existence.

"The bells of the College of the Holy Spirit of the Company of Jesus announced emphatically the death of Catharina de San Juan, the news travelling by word of mouth.

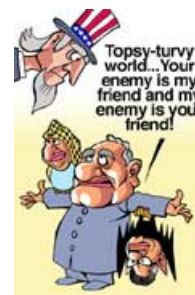
"Such a large number of people arrive that four streets were crammed and the guards could not prevent the doors, panels and latches from being broken."

Latin inscriptions on her tomb preserved to this date state: "To the all-powerful supreme God. This sepulchre contains the venerable in Christ Virgin Catharina de San Juan, who was given to the world by the land of the Mogor (land of Mughals, meaning India).

After having lived for 82 years, loved principally by God, and no less by men, humble and poor in slavery, although illustrious because of her royal blood, her death occurred, followed by great acclamation on the part of the people and the clergy, on the eve of the three Holy Kings, in the year 1688."

However, in 1691, the three books written by the Jesuits on her life were banned by the church, confiscated and burnt as being "useless, improbable, revelations, visions and apparitions, full of contradictions and improper, indecent and impetuous comparisons...with no more foundation than the vain credulity of the author".

Though she was not beatified, the town where she lived and died, Puebla de los Angeles, exchanged its name with China Poblana, her pet name, symbolising the contacts and encounters of New Spain with India.



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