

Classic Poetry Series

Bahinabai Chaudhari

- poems -

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Bahinabai Chaudhari(24 August 1880 - 3 December 1951)

Bahinabai Chaudhari (Devanagari: बाहिनबाई चौधरी) or Bahinabai Nathuji Chaudhari, was a noted Marathi poetess from Maharashtra, India.

Bahinabai was born to a Brahmin family in the village of Aasod in the district of Jalgaon. Her poetry brings alive her surroundings through the Ahirani dialect which is spoken in those parts of the State. Hailing from a farmer's household, most of her poems are based on farming, land, joy and sorrow of farmers, trees, animals and the nature.

Bahina, at the age of 5, was married to a 30-year-old Brahmin, a widower and relative. When she was 9, Bahinabai, her immediate family and her husband had to leave their village because of a family quarrel. After a long journey and two years in a town where her husband performed religious services, the family arrived in the holy city of Kolhapur. There, Bahina heard the devotional verses of the Warkari teacher Tukaram (c.1608-1650), recited not in the Sanskrit of Brahmin worship, but in the vernacular and so accessible to all. This experience was to determine the rest of Bahina's life. Although a member of the highest (Brahmin) caste, she wished to become a follower of Tukaram, of the lowest (Shudra) caste; the wife and daughter of priests committed to upholding the ancient rituals wished to become a devotee who chooses pure devotion over ritual.

Following the narrative section of her work are over 350 Abhanga (a kind of devotional verse) on various devotional matters: on the life of bhakti (devotion), on true Brahminism, on the duties of a wife.

Her understanding of human life is difficult to fathom. Though widowed early, she was self sufficient and independent. Her poems are an invaluable treasure of Marathi literature. They reflect her real day-to-day life and are composed in the form of Marathi Ovi (quadruples), which are simple yet very appealing.

For example,

Asaa Raajaa shetkari, chaallaare aalvaani,
Dekhaa tyaachyaa paayaakhaale, kaate gele vaakisani

(So royal is the farmer, walking barefooted,

Look under his feet, the thorns are bent)

A strong memory, keen observation, inborn humour, a wisdom to view at joy and sorrow alike and a philosophy built on the hardships of growing up are a few qualities of her poetry.

Aala Saas, Gela Saas, Jeeva Tujha Re Tantra
Arey Jagna-Marna Eka Sasacha Antar

(Breath in, Breath out, life so is your doctrine
Life and death are just a breath apart)

Or

Lekichyaa maaheraasaathi maay saasri naandate

(The mother abides in her in-laws house to create a parental haven for her daughter)

Such is the incredibly minimal use and simplicity of Bahinabai's words to explain the wisdom of human life.

It is mainly due to Acharya Pralhad Keshav Atre that this invaluable poetry of Bahinabai could reach and be read by the world. This happy event happened just as a diamond is found by a knowledgeable jeweller. It was sometime in July-August of 1950. A young man, Bahinabai's son, poet Sopan Dev Chaudhari, hesitantly approached Atre with a manuscript. The handwritten manuscript was a collection of poems by his mother written by him and his maternal brother as she was illiterate. This manuscript had fallen in his hands while going through her possessions after her death. After going through the manuscript Atre exclaimed Hey this is pure 24 carat gold! It would be a sin to hide this from Maharashtra!

And truly after reading Bahinabai's poems one realises that the literary world would have lost a real gem if these poems had not been published.

Atre, a humorist, journalist, a politician and orator par excellence writes in his foreword to Bahinabai Chaudhari's poems, I literally jumped to extract all the pages of the script. They were so enchanting and left me breathless.

Just like the Doha of Saint-Poet Kabir, Bahinabai's lines mesmerize readers of all ages, sects and strata of society. Her poetry has the same sagacity and philosophy that ascetics arrive at after many years of devout austerity.

When her mother-in-law chided her for having scalded her hands while making Bhakri (flat bread of sorghum or millet), Bahinabai says in her poetic way:

Arey Sansaar Sansaar, Jasa Tava Chulyavar
Adhi Hatala Chatake, Tevha Milte Bhaakar

(Oh this married life, just like a pan on the hearth
First it burns the hand, only then one gets the bread)

Or

Dev kuthe dev kuthe – aabhaayaachyaa aarpaar
Dev kuthe dev kuthe – tuzhya bubuyamazaar

(Where is God where is God – beyond the skies
Where is God where is God – in your eyes)

She so easily renders life's philosophy succinctly and in simple words, a subject which usually a matter of large tomes. It is indeed Maharashtra's great fortune that such a divine poet was born and blossomed in this land.

Though Bahinabai was totally illiterate, she was an accomplished poetess. She verbally composed her poems in ovi (???) metre, and her son Sopandev Chaudhari (1907–1982) wrote them down on paper. Her poems in Leva Ganboli language reflected her minute observations of nature and human life around her. They displayed her sense of subtle humor and much wisdom.

Are, Sansar Sansar

Bahinabai Chaudhari

Man Va?Haya Va?Haya

Bahinabai Chaudhari