Do not call anything, anything

Bahinabai Choudhari
Translated (from Ahirani) and introduced by Rohini Shukla

Bahinabai Choudhari (1880-1951) was born in an agrarian village called Asoda in northern Maharashtra. She was a devotee of Vitthal – beloved God of the Varkari tradition, initiated by Saint Dnyaneshwar in the thirteenth century. To the present day, a special practice of the Varkari tradition is the vaari – devotees from across Maharashtra walk together for days, from their native villages to Pandharpur, Vitthal’s spiritual abode. They sing and dance to songs in praise of Vitthal, engendering a rich oral and performative tradition.

Bound by her family and farms, Bahinabai did not partake in the vaaris. Instead, she composed and sang couplets called ovyaa, as she toiled in the fields and the kitchen along with fellow women. To be sure, there is hardly a kitchen in Maharashtra, not enriched by her ovyaa; they are known for their simplicity, light-hearted humour, aphorisms about nature, rhythm and, of course, their magical ability to comfort endlessly labouring farmers and home makers.

This ovi is translated from an exhaustive collection of Bahinabai’s ovyaa, titled Bahinayichi Gaani, published by Suchitra Prakaashan in 2012. We are indebted to Sopandev, Bahinabai’s son, who scripted her ovyaa and published them posthumously; and also the many women who have kept this oral tradition alive.

* * *

Do not call it a boll
that blooms without cotton;
do not call it a mouth
that doesn't chant Hari’s name.

Do not call it a leaf
that doesn't sway with the winds;
do not call it an ear,
deafened to Hari’s name.

Do not call it a farm
with no water canals, not even a well;
do not call them eyes,
blinded to God.

Do not call it a night
that puts to sleep a starving stomach;
do not call them hands
if they cringe before doing good deeds.

Do not call it a shed
if it has no water;
do not call them legs
if they do not run for help.

Do not call it a vessel
that returns empty from a well;
do not call it a stomach
that fills nothing but itself.

Do not call it a cow
who doesn't recognize Kaanhaa;
do not call her a mother
who does not bear milk.

Oh, a rope lying on the road –
ever call it a snake;
do not call him a father
who sells his own daughter.

Do not call it cream,
that’s only a layer of curdled milk;
do not call her a mother
who loves no longer.

Do not call him a nobleman,
who is forgetful of self-respect;
do not call it a child
if of no use to the donors of life.

Do not call it devotion,
bereft of passionate emotion;
do not call it vigour
if it lacks the zest of life.