

Dear Bahina...

by

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Translated from Hindi by Ved Mitra Shukla\*

**(ONE)**

A city Kolhapur

Before me

A city Kolhapur

In my mind

Who is descending from a hill?

No one

The hill just like a rhythm descending

In my mind

How is this rhythm, or the hill wrapped in rhythm

Moving breathing

Dancing, wavering, singing

Reminding me of a girl

Hereabout

Who like a fragrance merged with the wind

Revolving in many circles

For millennia, whose image is this sticking in my subconscious mind?

Recognizable

Unrecognizable

Which building is this collapsing?

As the girl in a rhythm

Who is this girl?

Touching the apex of sound-rhythm-beat

In my memory

Just see, because of the beat of *mridanga*<sup>1</sup>

Past and present has come in a momentum

Lines of city, color and hills have started shaking

Who is singing mildly

Tuka's *abhang*<sup>2</sup>

Is it the same girl

Sticking in memory?

**(TWO)**

Yes, I'm that girl

Merged into *abhang* Bahina Bai

Crossing over centuries have come

From past to present and from the present...

From the sound of *vina-kartal*<sup>3</sup>

Coming out a vibration

Piercing the *kala-chakras*<sup>4</sup>

Amidst the beats of *mridanga*

Lowest-concentrated a musical prelude

Pervading the time periods

In that I am absorbed quietly

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<sup>1</sup> A percussion instrument from India

<sup>2</sup> A form of devotional poetry sung in praise of the Hindu god Vutthala

<sup>3</sup> Musical instrument especially used by Indian saints

<sup>4</sup> A term from Vajrayana Buddhism that means wheel of time or time-cycles

In the process of my being  
In my life and death  
In my pain and happiness  
In my silence  
The girl remains walking with me  
In the long journey  
I know her

By birth she is with me  
My friend, my fellow traveller  
That took care of me in all miseries  
Won't let me fall  
When I found easy to die  
She gave me strength

She says with love  
'Dear Bahina, don't cry, tell me your problem'  
Badly upset, what should I say  
Remembering-  
First time, when I  
After leaving my own lovable home and village  
Came dreaming  
To sweetheart's city Kolhapur

Very first day I guessed  
There was no hope here  
And disappointment limitless  
'And dream?' asked she-  
Replied with resentment  
'With a husband thirty years older than me

Tell me, will I dream?’

Friend refuted: ‘Hey Bahina, when will you understand

Beyond the age

Dream sky

Keep dreaming-

In a damp and dark home

Dream of glow worm

In dark

A bit of light’s dream’

Before that I say something

She disappeared

I looked within

Started to think, “Who is reminding my own self to me

Making me aware of each moment

Wishing that I should live and dream?”

What should I do?

Till when should I dream?

Breathless because of thirst

Why should I not want?

Water lake

By breaking solid layers of hard ground

Why should I not sing in a way that

I swing in joy

Start swinging

Plants-Trees, flowers- leaves

Whole atmosphere

Earth-sky

And I in search of a single home

Sometimes used to enter and exit in a dream

As much the search

So much the house went far away

Whenever I

With motion in hands and movement in feet

Absorbed with some thoughts

Humming some *dhuna*<sup>5</sup>

By pouncing sound of a knife

Someone breaks my concentration

And after tearing the *dhuna* in parts throws on dunghill

Kept sobbing

Working

Till late night

A bellowing remains suffocating within me

Wounding through some sharp blade

And a line of pain

Scratching on whole body

I feel –

Directions are turning black

And dream is nowhere.

### (THREE)

‘Really, is the dream nowhere?’

It is her voice that occupies me

Just to get rid of it, I say

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<sup>5</sup> Musical-spiritual note

'Don't mislead me  
Don't take me into dream  
I have to face that is before me  
Why should I keep flying in imaginary word?'

She giggles-  
'Dear Bahina! Today and yesterday  
There are no rivers flowing in opposite directions  
There is only one flow of the Time  
No doubt you smolder today as much as you want  
But just peep once into the past

I look back into the past  
I see-  
Squealing with delight a girl  
To be a doll with doll a girl  
Chasing after fawns an innocent girl  
To be a toy with toys a girl

With fun climbing-descending trees  
Swinging on branches a girl  
Lost in herself  
Drawing pictures on stones-rocks

I see her-  
Running after butterflies  
Filling the clouds in her fists  
Getting the first glance of sun rising from the backside of hill  
To the flowers saying something with joy and smiling

Innumerable colours of laughter

Her impulses  
Her communicative and sensitive language  
Her enjoyable movements  
Her pulsation  
Her poetry

I see-  
Endless colours of waterfall falling from a height of the hill  
In her laughter open-embracing

I recall-  
Walking with my mother  
Once being lost in jungle-  
On seeing wild animals  
Shrink in fear

And within second with an agony  
Piercing the bushes  
In search of the path  
Embedding into the inner layers of a hill

On the uncut stones engraved  
Humor, anger, love and pathos  
Watching them standstill

Complete hill in the hundreds of gestures  
In idols-temples  
In the matchless shapes-designs  
In movements and visuals  
Dancing-glowing  
In my childhood imagination

Of the rising sun carving stones  
Keep appearing in idols

What was that blissful feeling?  
How was that moment of attainment?  
That feeling of fulfillment  
And I try to capture  
The inner note of the things

In those days I heard  
Loud sound of hilly river  
And I felt the entire hill  
Was unified at a point of immersion  
With melody, rhythm, beats

And at that time, saw  
Reflected on the faces of villagers  
Emotions of over enjoyment  
Touching their heart, thrilling them  
Reminding them of music filled with simplicity

**(FOUR)**

Whose is this cruel laughter?  
Around me  
Makes me suffer, cry, threatened  
Relentlessly darkening  
My home, yard, walls

No direction, nowhere  
And I am isolated from the outer world  
Coming out of the note



From kitchen to drawing room

Just like a habit

Coming and going

Don't know how a *dhuna*

From some door or hole

Piercing the black curtain

Entered into my yard

Calling me

Through its hypnosis

And I without stopping, swaying like Radha reached there

Where Jayram Swami was singing *abhang* of Tukaram

Couldn't know

When I started to sing along with

Who tied wings in feet

Why Like a mad girl began swaying in delight

Came to know when I returned home at midnight

Burning eyes with anger were blaming:

'Where were you till now?'

Why did you cross the sill?

Where is your ridiculous singer

After whom you are running, leaving your home?

I'll not leave you today

I'll break yours

And your *shudra guru*<sup>6</sup> Tukaram's legs

That night he beat me badly

Imposed over me the blames of whole world

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<sup>6</sup> A teacher who is from the lowest of the four social categories in a text *Manusmriti*

In a cruel tornado  
Flying like a straw

Sometimes ear broke, sometimes nose  
Sometimes bleeding eyes  
Whole existence torn into pieces  
I was buried within me

All the scenes became smoky  
And the world of colours faded away

**(FIVE)**

I don't know  
What is salvation?  
I see-  
A man has covered himself  
With a sheet of the savior  
On which is written,  
"Follow me or die,  
Just follow me"

And he spreads the sheet all around  
Grits the teeth  
Runs for biting  
I laugh upon his absurd figure  
His sheet shakes because of my laughter  
And he runs towards me  
To devour me

Showing that he is so worried  
To free me from the snares

To teach me lesson of salvation with a bang  
While he doesn't know the spelling of salvation  
And even this time by plucking out my feathers  
He has fixed in his crown

In the name of salvation  
He has a gang  
Moving in speed  
Making others handicapped and slaves  
Teaching to be proud of stereotypes

Why should I bear disability?  
Why slavery?  
Why should I not throw away strangulating stereotypes?

I don't want that kind of salvation  
Which is obtained after strangulating others  
Or occupying their place

What should I do?  
He has stretched his canopy in such a way  
That stops breathing  
And I am unable to cry  
Finally seizing in his coils

What should I do?  
Running after the same *dhuna*  
Piercing curtains-canopies  
Calling me again and again  
Want to go  
Spellbound

But trembling, couldn't  
Cannot live without it  
Death on both sides  
Why should I not live and die along the *dhuna*

And I run with speed  
In the direction of the *dhuna*  
Leaping over the canopy of the savior  
Untying the entangled knot for centuries  
Breaking the customs  
Beyond the bondage of hell-heaven  
With the string of breathes  
Amid the visible-invisible, dream-nightmare  
I have come out  
With the *dhuna*

And when I return  
In front, the same terrible eyes casting terror  
Hissing with anger, the abusing savior  
And his people twisting the neck of language  
Battling- colliding with such people  
I have emerged  
Breathing in open  
I would not walk on a fixed track

There is my own path  
On which I walk with full belief  
With the people lost in the *dhuna*  
The sky is resonating with the beats of *mridanga*  
There is no fear in me now  
After touching the zenith of terror and torture

And seeing the death closely  
I have got freedom  
From fear and death  
From slavery of centuries

Witness of the freedom?  
Yes, just see  
Darkness has come to smolder  
There is a shower of colors in the tunnel  
Unsaid has started resonating  
In *naad*<sup>7</sup>, in word, in sound-beat-rhythm

**(SIX)**

I, a broken branch from a tree  
An innocent girl  
If you had not met  
What would have happened?

Whether it was you or someone else like you in the dream  
Holding my finger  
Said mildly: 'Awake'  
What was that in your touch and small address  
Which vibrated me  
From body to inner soul  
Changed my entire world  
With ease  
Have come to you

You gave me my identity

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<sup>7</sup> The cosmic sound or vibrations of the cosmos

Whole and entire  
Param Guru<sup>8</sup>! I am indebted to you  
In that undisturbed moment  
I felt some *shabd-naad* descended in me  
And has taught me to live  
Coming out of home  
I have got home

I saw and heard-  
The sky resonating with the beats of *mridanga*  
And experienced the word playing in each cell of my body  
Taking shapes at various levels  
Transforming into a poem

Forgotten note, lost word  
Hovering around me  
And I am looking-  
In the mirror of truth endless images!

(Composed in Hindi in 2005)

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<sup>8</sup> A preceding trusted spiritual teacher

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Bahinabai (1628-1700), a 17<sup>th</sup> century female saint, was born and brought up at Devgaon near Ellora, Aurangabad (Maharashtra). She had to marry a person 30 years older than her. At the age of 11-12 years, she began to live with her husband in Kolhapur. There, she acknowledged Tukaram as her spiritual *guru* after listening to his *abhangas* in *sankirtan* (oratorio) of Jayaram Swami. Her husband couldn't tolerate that she had acknowledged her *guru* to *shudra* Tukaram. He tortured and threatened her. But, out of pain and torture, she had been paving her own path in search of an identity.