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THE ATTITUDE OF DENIAL AND DISBELIEF IN ARUN KOLATKAR'S *JEJURI*

A. BANUPRIYA

Assistant Professor, Department of English, VISTAS.



ABSTRACT

Jejuri conjures up the daily rhythm of the pilgrims and the religious spot – the horrors of pilgrims, the tourist guides, the priests, the beggars, the bus stand and the railway station. Kolatkar does not sing poems in praise of the deity. He treats them rather in an offhand skeptical manner, which looks like desecration. The way he reveals the blind faith in ossified tradition and establishment, makes it appear as an act of conscious sacrilege and scathing iconoclasm. In fact Kolatkar has turned his critical scrutiny upon *Jejuri*, its surroundings, the people and the religious sentiments and points out the inherent defect of institutionalized religion.

KEYWORDS: Skepticism, blind faith, belief and loss.

INTRODUCTION

Indian poetry has always echoed the voice of the times and revealed the pains and passions of the Indian. Few Indian poets have captured the ethos of the city like Bombay-its immigrants, underdogs, social movements and spirituality as modernity was available to Indian English poets readymade. The Indian-ness was used by them very effectively.

They tried with varying degrees to success, to naturalize in the Indian soil the modernistic elements derived from the poetic revolution offered by T. S. Eliot and others in the twentieth century British and American Poetry. In the 1970's the creative genius like Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, JayanataMahaptra, ArunKolatkara and other seem to disregard the inevitable compulsion of rhythm, intelligibility and sometimes even grammar. But unfortunately from the verified chaos the work of these poets stands out of virtue of its unmistakable authenticity, significance and power.

This study clearly deals with the poems of ArunKolatkara in detail, a satire on the blind faith in ossified tradition and the establishment, exclusiveness, dilapidation and general deadness

prevailing that lacks the vision of primeval vigour and the joy of life.

A BILINGUAL, MAHARASHTRIAN POET

ArunKolatkara (1932-2004) is that rare phenomenon among many Indian English poets - a bilingual poet, writing both in English and his mother tongue (Marathi, in this case). His poetry shows his constant experimentation with style and structure and reveals his complex modernity, urban sensibility that absorbs the surroundings as it is and tries to comment and make sense of it through a modern outlook. Only fewer bi-lingual poets influenced modern Marathi poets like he did. But sadly, few poets remain as forgotten as the man who penned *Jejuri*, a remarkable poetry collection on the pilgrimage site of Khandoba in Pune. Kolatkar became quite the muse over the years. He had said that he wanted his poetry to be read by the non-reader and admirably achieves that in his works. He is the poet of the ordinary, very anti-spectacular and anti-academic. His poems are oblique, whimsical and present a dark, sinister and surrealistic vision of life. His poems stand "a work that gives inspiration direction to all future Marathi poets".

Kolatkhar is a very keen observer of all places that he visited. In his *Jejuri* he shows pilgrimage, myth, religion, god, rituals and in every aspect he wants to discover the actual truth behind everything. All the descriptions of *Jejuri* come forth to us through thirty one lively and vividly poems with a unique touch of skepticism and modernity, there is an underlying duality in this entire poetry collection – a duality of writer's perceptive of religion, of belief and skepticism, of legend and truth and all these oscillating between the dialectic of tradition and modernity.

ArunKolatkhar is a poet par excellence as he has the brave heart to experiment with the fusion of modern and traditional modes of poetry. He is a realistic poet with faith on God and religion. But he rates the hypocrisy that prevailed in Indian society and his skeptic, rationalistic mind along with the ability to observe anything with keenness allows him to comment on anything and it also helped him to assess the unknown world in a surrealistic way.

Jejuri where the holy shrine of Khandoba stands attracts millions of pilgrims from all sections of the Hindu community. Khandoba is worshipped in Maharashtra and also in Karnataka, Telengana, Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu. Khadoba had been worshipped by Kolatkhar's ancestors and there were several myths tied to the temple of Khadoba. The temple being situated at his birth place and never ending tales of Khandoba made him visit the place *Jejuri*, a centre for pilgrims which his forefathers must have visited several times.

Jejuri the poem opens with a journey to *Jejuri* and closes with the return journey in the offspring, thus suggesting the motif of a quest; it depicts a direct and unflinching attitude of denial and disbelief. Kolatkhar seems to be debunking and denigrating not only people's faith in this kind of worship but in all kinds having its origin in a belief in the existence of gods and goddess.

It is certainly an experiment in a fruitful direction as indicated by A. K. Ramanujan, viz., a serious attempt by a modern English poet to review his ancient heritage ArunKolatkhar, one of the leading literary voices of his generation has contributed immensely towards raising Indian English poetry to its present canonical status, The self-conscious voice

of yester years has therefore been replaced by authentic voice of its own.

A REVIEW:

Pre independence Indian English Poetry was more or less historical, imitative, and imperative and those poetry were rather less experimental in form. But after 60's the scenario began to change. Many new poets came and began to write freely and with more experimentation. After the 80's the poets became braver and broke the earlier traditions and techniques. Their poetry reflected the Indian society, its culture, people was with new kinds of images, dictions, structure and at the same time they satirized many things which they found orthodox, corrupted and evil.

A. Dubey commented about *Jejuri* "Jejuri is full of pictures of aridity and ugliness, decay and neglect, fossilization and perversion. In Kolatkhar's poems, inanimate objects often form a parallel world constantly endeavoring to defeat human beings their behaviour often assumes ironical human ways"(Indo English Poetry 139).

Jejuri obviously deals with the spiritual journey of a 'citified' poet, whose animadversions on various ways of living assume the nature of and ironic commentary. The poet's journey is a journey with a difference; it is purposeless spiritual journey into the timeless myths and their ossification. Prof. S. K. Desai observes; "The protagonist goes to *Jejuri* not as a seeker or a pilgrim ... He is a kind of traveler ... a tourist ..." (Indo English Poetry 144).

The poet is much more interested in holding up to view the meaningful of all guests and the tourist – pilgrim becomes another Sweeney in the spiritual wasteland. ArunKolatkhar's poetry collection *Jejuri* reminds us of our connectedness. It is considered as "one of the great books of modern India" to its being the poetry equivalent of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. (Living Indian English Poets 273).

Many people across the country go to *Jejuri* to pay their obeisance to God, to worship the images of God and to make their offerings in an effort to praise him and win his favour. But Kolatkhar has not written the poem *Jejuri* to celebrate the Gods or to pay his personal tribute and homage to him. Kolatkhar seems to be debunking and denigrating not only people's faith in this kind of

worship but in all kinds of worship having its origin in a belief in existence of Gods and Goddesses. AmitChaudhuri has rightly said it is "a sequence of stunning, simple but haunting poems, Jejuri is one of the great books of modern India" (Indian English Poetry 81).

Jejuri had provoked a considerable amount of debate because of its attitude to the religious experience. The myths and legends attached to the religious spot make it a more famous one. Kolatkar has written this poem not to celebrate the God Khandoba or to pay his homage to him. In fact he does not even fully or whole-heartedly believe in idol worship to be a kind of superstition, though he does not openly say so anywhere in the poem. While going through the poem *Jejuri*, it depicts a direct and unflinching attitude of denial and disbelief.

ANALYSIS

Kolatkar's *Jejuri* is a religious satire. Satire on religious hypocrisy in *Jejuri* is analyzed in detail. *The Bus* the opening poem establishes the theme of Jejuri. The windows of the bus are covered with tarpaulin; it is a state transport bus that takes the pilgrims to the temple of Khandoba at Jejuri. The bus's windows covered with tarpaulin symbolize the mental insolation and narrow mindedness of the pilgrims. The cold wind which slaps the tarpaulin which in turn nudges the elbow of the pilgrims is symbolic of the reasons which try to attack the thick tarpaulin like beliefs of the pilgrims.

A cold wind keeps whipping

And slapping a corner of the tarpaulin

At your elbow (Jejuri 13)

The protagonist with modern sensibility tries to search out for signs of daybreak in the lights spilled out of the bus. But the sunrays are not allowed to fall completely hence the receptivity to change is very limited.

You look down the roaring road

You search for the signs of daybreak in

What little light spills out of the bus. (Jejuri

13)

The head lights of the Bus which again dispel the darkness of a little area are symbolic of the solace the human mind experiences through the religious rituals. The split image in the old man's spectacles.

"Your own divided face in the pair of glasses on an old man's nose" (Jejuri 13) symbolizes the conflict between the protagonist's own mind which wants him to go to Jejuri and on the other hand his skeptic mind which questions its credibility. The last line of the poem "you don't step inside the old man's head" (Jejuri 13) makes it clear that the pilgrims enter Jejuri, with the same urban skeptic mind.

At the end of the bumpy ride

With your own face on either side

When you get off the bus (Jejuri 13)

In the poem *The Priest* which opens with a sarcastic note depicting the ugliness and commercialization of Jejuri making use of the religious imagery simply to dig at the rituals and to bring reality to light.

An offering of Leel and Launch

On the cold alter of the culvert wall

The priest waits (Jejuri 14)

He shows how the society is money minded and the priest is no more an exception. He waits for the arrival of the bus as the pilgrims are the source of his income. He is more concerned about the bus timetable and the number of pilgrims whereby offering pooja to the deity is secondary. He often comes out to see if the bus has arrived or not chanting some mantra with a 'PuranPoli' in his plate as if he is praying for the bus and its passengers.

On the cold alter of the culvert wall the priest

In the bus a little late

The priest wonders

Will there be a PuranPoli in his plate (Jejuri 14)

The Priest is interested only in calculating what he will get from the tourists' offerings rather than doing his poojas. Everything here is made in a commercial way. The place is surrounded with beggars and hungry people. The poet compares the priest with an animal to show his anger.

As a catgrin on his face

And a live, ready to eat pilgrims

Held between its teeth (Jejuri 15)

Hill is symbolic of the ascending planes of higher consciousness. The wretchedness of the hills indicates the lack of human efforts in this direction. Men learn from the society and from his surroundings. More clearly he learns from his parents. This picture is portrayed in *The Priest's Son*, he is a young boy often depicted by his father to

take the tourists to different parts of the temple and explain the significance. He describes various legends about Khandoba and his deeds. There are five hills situated close to one another which are described by the priest's son to the protagonist as being the stone figures of the five demons whom Khandoba had killed.

The five hills

Are the five demons

That Khandoba killed (Jejuri 30)

When questioned about his belief he looks merely uncomfortable. He shrugs and, looking away, draws the attention of the protagonist to a butterfly on the grass.

he doesn't reply

but merely looks uncomfortable

shrugs and looks away

look

there's a butterfly

there (Jejuri 30)

The Priests' son himself does not believe in the authenticity of the stories about Khandoba. But just for the sake of livelihood he has to give credibility to the legends and cannot deny it. Hence, Jejuri has become a place to earn one's livelihood rather than a place of devotion.

The poem *Heart of Ruin* depicts the state of utter dilapidation and neglect. The Maruti temple has come down and is knocking the heads of the God

The roof comes down on Maruti's head

Nobody seems to mind (Jejuri 16)

The temple is now in ruined condition and people abandon the temple and the gods, resides in it. The premise of a temple has become the living place of a bitch and her puppies. In spite of these things God resides in this place.

A mongrel bitch has founded a place for herself and her puppies

... No more place of worship this place is nothing less than the house of god (Jejuri 16)

The temple of Maruthi the heart of ruins leads the poet to conclude, that it is no more a place of worship. The poet seems to be happy to believe that it is truly a house of God, sheltering different creatures.

No more a place of worship this place is nothing less than the house of god (Jejuri 16). Rajeev Patke comments "The shrine is the 'Heart of Ruin'. Kolatkar's non-committal insouciance notes with whimsical accuracy every visual detail to be encountered in a slow amble in and around the shrine, while carefully maintaining a blind spot for the dereliction of faith at the exact centre of he will not look at directly (Living Indian English Poet 276).

It is very difficult to decide at Jejuri what is god and what is stone. The dividing line between god and a stone is very difficult to determine because any stone, which a pilgrim picks up, may prove to be the image of god; and the next stone which one picks up, may turn out to be god's cousin

What is god

and what is stone

the dividing line

if it exists

is very thin

at Jejuri

and every other stone

Is god or his cousin (Jejuri 32)

Any stone which the pilgrim picks up, either from the dirty loose earth or from the hard rock would find the stone to be a sacred one and a personification of some god. There is one huge rock, of the size of a bedroom. The portion of the rock is Khandoba's wife who has been turned into a stone figure by Khandoba when he had struck her down with his sword in a state of fury. The crack, which runs across that portion of the rock, is the scar of the wound which the wife had received from her husband's sword which had a broad blade. The rock bear witness to Khandoba's murder of his wife in a fit of anger.

The giant hunk of rock

the size of a bedroom

is Khandoba's wife turned into stone

the crack that runs right across

is the car from his broadsword (Jejuri 32)

In *YeshwantRao* he breaks all the barriers and satirizes the god. It is a poem where gods are assaulted, insulted and mocked. Here different gods are available for different purposes. There is also a second class god name YeshwantRao, who gives happiness, peace and wealth in this commercial

materialistic world. His place is just outside the main temple, outside the outer wall. The poet becomes conscious of discrimination and starts tirading ironically against gods considered superior to YeshwantRao. Gods who soak you for your gold

Gods who soak you for your gold

Gods who soak you for your soul

Gods who make you walk On a bed of burning coal (Jejuri 49)

He is a God of difference having the shape of protoplasm. Although he himself I limbless, he is "a kind of a bone setter" devotees worship him for his very quality. The poet humorously says If you're short of limbed

YeshwantRao will lend you a hand and get back on your feet (Jejuri 68)

The Door exemplifies Kolatkar's verbal irony and develops the theme of existence in ruin. To Kolathkar "the heavy medieval door" that "hangs on one hinge alone" appears as "A prophet half brought down / from the cross", "a dangling martyr", a flayed man of muscles who cannot find his way back to an anatomy book" and a local drunk "leaning against / any od doorway to sober up". All these images used for the door the door are highly eloquent and reveal the poet's playfulness. The poet's mocking tone in the last two stanzas is worth noticing as he sees a "pair of shorts" left "to dry" upon the shoulder of the door:

Hell with the hinge and damn the jamb.

The door would have walked out

long long ago

if it weren't for

that pair of shorts

left to dry upon its shoulders (Jejuri 35)

The poem *The Cupboard* exhibits his skill for sharp satire. The earlier poems portrays that the stone gods are left uncared for, attended on animals or by insects only. In this poem, the "gold gods" have been given a better status by locking them up for safety in the cupboard. It becomes obvious that gods in Jejuri temple are preserved in view of the quality of the stuff the happen to be made of

you can see the golden gods

beyond the strips

of stock exchange quotations

they look out at you from behind slashed editorials and promises of eternal youthyou see a hand of gold

behind opinion

stiff with starch

as one would expect

there is naturally

a lock upon the door (Jejuri 48)

Conclusion

Kolathkar's *Jejuri* offer a rich description of India and the town Jejuri which is a spiritual quest. It is an effort to find the drive trace in a degenerate world. With irony as a weapon *Jejuri* is the work of a unique and visionary voice. His poems have double meaning as the primary surface shows the general discussion about the subject matter, but on the deeper level these poems show his criticism and his inner thought process, rationalism, disbelief and skepticism on the society, the worship place and the worshipper. With this irony and criticism he gives new dimensions to Indian English poetry and later poems follow him. His poems are presented from a modern point of view by a modern rationalist.

Jejuri is a poem about a modern wasteland's loss of faith than a poem which contracts deadness of perception with the ability to see the divine in the natural vitality of life. The poet does not make any choice between God and stone. When queried as to whether he believed in God or not, Kolatkar had replied in an interview 'I leave the question alone. I don't think I have to take a position about God one way or the other (Living Indian English Poets 142). The poet, however, is not debunking religion but merely presenting the truth which he had found after actually visiting Jejuri. His insatiable intellectual curiosity leads him to unravel the 'real behind the perceived' as he delves deep into the life and culture of Jejuri.

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