

ARIDITY OF LIFE REFLECTED IN ARUN KOLATKAR's JEJURI

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Abstract

Arun Kolatkar (1931-2004) was one of India's greatest modern poets who wrote prolifically in both Marathi and English. Sunday Guardian describes him as "The quintessential poet of Bombay, Kolatkar embodies in his poetry, like his contemporaries, a new way of knowing the urban space not nativist, not internationalist, not global, not national." 'Jejuri' is a collection of poems (31sections) describing the protagonists' journey to the place going there by bus and returning by railway. The dividing line between faith and skepticism and aridity of life are the main themes of the collection of poems. The postmodern poetry of Indian Literature challenges the age old values and traditions. The research paper tries to prove how Kolatkar challenges the faith in God by describing the ruined conditions of the temples of 'Jejuri'. Kolatkar doesn't celebrate his visit to the God on the contrary, he challenges the age old customs.

Keywords: *Skepticism, Aridity of life, Pilgrim, Visitor, Tourist, Disbelief, God.*

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Arun Kolatkar was a poet from Maharashtra, born in Kolhapur in 1932, he worked as a commercial artist in Mumbai. Writing poetry was a hobby for him. He won many awards from the Commercial Artist Guild in India. He was a well renowned Indo Anglian poet writing in Marathi and English both, his poems are written on everyday matters. Modern Marathi poets were influenced by Arun Kolatkar's poems. He has written many poems directly in English while some poems were translated from Marathi into English. The best part of it is that he has been able to convey the soul and spirit of the poem in English and not only meaning. His poems in English include 'Boatride' and 'Jejuri'. The poem 'Jejuri' won Commonwealth poetry prize in 1977.

'Jejuri' first published in 1976 is considered as "one of the great books of modern India". 'Jejuri' is a remarkable poem for the aptness of diction, lucidity, colloquial style, brevity, use of irony etc. His other works are *Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita* (1977), *Bhijaki Vahi* (2004), *Kala Ghoda Poems*, *Chirimiri* (2004), *Droan* (2004). He received Kusumagraj Purskar in 1991 and Bahinabai Purskar in 1995.

Jejuri is a site of pilgrimage in Maharashtra. It is very famous for the legacy of God Khandoba. There are number of legends of Khandoba. The number of devotees is also very large. 'Jejuri' the poem is a description of poet's journey to the holy place. Actually while traveling through this village, Kolatkar takes the reader on a journey. It is so realistically presented through words that even the reader gets a glimpse of this place only through reading the poems. Jejuri is a place where one finds the mixture of devotion and commercialism. This place is holy as well as commercial, rich in legacy but ruinous in condition. Pilgrims have immense faith in God Khandoba. Pilgrims visit Jejuri, worship the God, make their offerings and win his blessings and favour. Kolatkar's point of view is of sight seeing. He does not visit this place to pay tribute to the God. There are 31 sections in the poem 'Jejuri'. Throughout these sections, it seems that the poet does not believe in idol worship or even in God. He nowhere, mentions it directly but his scepticism and disbelief is predominant in the poem.

"There is no intrusion of his own self in these poems. He allows the reader to form his own judgments and contents himself with giving to the reader an account of the pilgrimage in the capacity of a detached observer. However, his use of irony does convey to the reader how Kolatkar's own mind is working in relation to the worship of the idols and images at Jejuri".

The protagonist in the poem 'Manohar' who, as we all know, is the poet himself is a representative of those people who think rationally. He does not believe in any

superstitions. He does not trust blindly the stories and myths told by the priests. He is an observer. In 1978, an interviewer asked him if he believed in God and Kolatkar said, "I leave the question alone, I don't think I have to take a position about God one way or the other." (Bruce king, P-170)

The Temple of Jejuri is dedicated to Lord Khandoba, also known as Malhari Martand, incarnation of Lord Shiva. He is also known as Mhalasakant. In Karnataka Muslim people call him Mallu Khan.

The poem 'Jejuri' begins with 'a daybreak'; the 'daybreak' is symbol of awakening of sceptical mind. The poem 'Makarand' is the example of poet's disbelief in God where he refuses to enter the temple for 'puja'. Instead of that, he prefers to smoke, He says,

"I will be out in the courtyard
where no one will mind
if I smoke."(Kolatkar P.39)

He does not stop his friend from doing the 'puja' but he is unwilling to do it. The line in the poem,

"But you go right ahead'
if that's what you want to do"(Kolatkar P.39)

This suggests indirectly that protagonist is not ready to do puja , Monohar the protagonist is in the search of truth behind the faith of devotees. Though the setting of the poem 'Jejuri' is religious, the poem is not religious one. Most of the poems are ironical in tone. At many places in the poem, the protagonist points at the blind faith of the pilgrims. He observes everything with a keen eye. Every time whenever any such sceptical thought comes into his mind, he very openly mentions it in the poem. M.K. Naik says "In any case all his reactions to Jejuri manifestly show his to be a typical modern urban sceptic." (Naik, M.K.P. 26)

The poem 'A Low Temple' is one more example. This is a temple is one ceiling. Even sufficient sunlight does not reach inside the temple. Naturally the pilgrims can not see the images of God.

"A low temple keeps its God in the dark
You lend a match box to the priest
One by one the Gods come to light"(Kolatkar P.17)

In the light of matchstick, the pilgrims are able to see the images clearly. Among these statues there is a statue of a goddess with eighteen arms. The protagonist asks the priests who that Goddess is,

"The eight arm goddess, the priest replies
A sceptic match coughs,
You can count.
But she has eighteen, you protest"(Kolatkar P.17)

Inspite of the protest by the protagonist for the priest,

"All the same she is still an eight
arm goddess to the priest"(Kolatkar P.17)

The above line shows how people blindly believe in myths or legends. They do not even take the efforts to search the reality.

Every legend and every myth tends to acquire a stronger and still stronger hold upon the minds of the people with the passing of time. Years only strengthen the legends and the myths and this is what seems to have happened not only at Jejuri but at the many places of pilgrimage in India.

In the poem 'A scratch', Kolatkar ridicules the blind faith of the pilgrim. He says that every stone at Jejuri is sacred because it is or it can be an image of some god. The word 'scratch' is used to convey the thought that even scratching of a stone, can give birth to a discovery of a legend.

"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" (Kolatkar P.28)

Manohar, in the poem is in puzzle because he could not differentiate between a God and a stone. If one might pick up a stone and scratch it, most probably it will turn out to be a cousin of God embodied in the first stone. He humorously says here,

"There is no crop
other than God
and is harvested here
around the year" (Kolatkar P.28)

As a God is holy and worshipped by people, his cousin also deserves worship. Kolatkar has used the weapon of irony to mock the blind faith of the people.

"Scratch a rock
and a legend springs" (Kolatkar P.28)

This last line of the poem again shows how legends originate and how they are spread and believed by people. Enchanted by the place, Jejuri, Manohar enters into a place finding the door open, expecting that it must be one more temple. And then he realizes it is not a temple, it is just a 'cowshed'.

The poem 'Water Supply' pictures the condition of the water tap as a 'brass mouse with a broken neck.' It further describes the dry condition of the water tap. Somebody has put pair of shorts left to dry upon the shoulders of the door otherwise the door would have been taken away by someone. The old Woman's condition is no less than a beggar. She wants fifty paisa coin from the visitor and in return she would show him the horseshoe shrine which is seen by the visitor already. Her distressed and miserable condition is shown through

"What else can an old woman do

on hills as wretched as these?" (Kolatkar P. 21)

Various myths and legends are spread in Jejuri.

"These five hills
all the five demons
that khandoba killed." (Kolatkar P. 26)

The information is given to the visitor by the priest's son who is playing the role of a guide as the schools have vacations. If any questions are asked by the visitor to the priest's son instead of answering the questions the shrugs and looks away. 'The Reservoir' is full of silt and there is not a drop of water in it.

Another poem 'Heart of Ruin' refers to a temple in ruinous condition at Jejuri. As the temple, it is in the state of ruined, it is called 'Heart of Ruin'. It is a humorous poem. The roof of the temple has fallen down upon the head of God Maruti. A stray dog has given to her offsprings there. The description of 'pariah puppies', 'its stumbling' and 'dung beetle' show the condition of the temple. Even the collection box "never did get a chance to get out/from the crushing weight of the roof beam." (Kolatkar P.12)

Poet further describes

"No more a place of worship this place
is nothing less than a house of God"(Kolatkar P.12)

This is not a temple where any one should come to offer worship and yet the god has not left the place. People can offer worship at any place, at home or anywhere not necessarily one should visit a temple. God is omnipotent and omnipresent. There are incidents in 'Jejuri' that reveal a typical modern urban sceptic mind of the poet. "In reality, however, the poem oscillates between faith and skepticism in a tradition that has run its course" (Parthasarthy R. P.40)

The poet also portrays priests and the description is ironical, humorous. In the second poem 'The Priest', he portrays a priest who is more interested in the income and the offerings made by the pilgrims. The priest is eagerly waiting for the bus and wonders,

"Will there be a Puranpoli in his plate?"(Kolatkar P.10)

The poet is mocking at the greed of the priest. Being a priest, he is not doing a religious service. He is not a genuine priest. His livelihood depends on the pilgrims and the offering made by them. He even recites 'mantra' again and again so that his wishes will be fulfilled. The poem 'The Priest's Son' is also written in ironical tone. The priest's son points out five demons killed by God Khondoba. The Protagonist simply asks the question to the priest's son whether he really believes that story, that boy has no reply. He looks very uncomfortable and tries to change the topic and draws protagonist's attention towards a butterfly in the grass. The boy very cleverly avoids the inconvenient question asked by the protagonists. Even the priest's son knows that his livelihood is dependent on the credibility of the legends and he simply can't deny it. He is playing the role of a tourist guide as there are holidays for his school.

“Kolatkar presents through a special kind of consciousness of microcosm reflecting in some significant way the microcosm of the universe. He also puts forth man’s quest for identity in this vast universe.” (Tayade, Vilas)

Another poem ‘Yashwant Rao’ is about a god who is marginalized. Kolatkar writes –
“He is merely a kind of a bone setter”(Kolatkar P- 45)

The poet says here that Yashwant Rao is not highest category god. He belongs to the second rank. He is not given any place inside the main temple. He is outside of the temple. Having no head, no hands, no feet, he understands the misery of those people who do not have limbs or who have suffered fracture.

Throughout the whole poem, poet’s skepticism and disbelief in God and myths, keeps dominating. But in the last poem, ‘Between Jejuri and Railway Station’, poet mentions certain things which are superstitious. At the railway station, protagonist wants to know the exact time of arrival of the train and nobody on the platform, not the booking clerk or the station master know the time of train. The protagonist is so desperate that he is ready to-

‘slaughter a goat before the clock
smash a coconut on the railway track,
smear the indicator with the blood of cock,
bathe the station master in milk”. (Kolatkar P.57)

All this just to know the time of train. These lines represent the strong hold of blind faith on human mind but it is again humorous that the poet is ready to do all these things to get out the village. Dr. S. K. Desai compares Kolatkar with T.S. Eliot. He states “ Eliot’s mind is full of history, myth, legend and strong emotional attitudes, whereas Kolatkar’s mind is free from knowledge which is always of the past, but fully engaged the way of truth.” (Raykar Shubhangi P. 65)

The very first poem ‘The bus’ is descriptive about the purpose of journey to Jejuri. The lines,

“Your own divided face
in a pair of glass on an old man’s nose
is all the countryside you get to see”(Kolatkar P.9)

seems to comment on two aspects of human personality, one who believes in God i.e. theist and the other who is atheist. We all think that we all believe in some or the other God but we can’t in the other person’s head.

The line,

“You don’t step inside the old man’s head” (Kolatkar P. 9)

seems to quite clear that the attitude of Kolatkar is of atheist, non believer in God/Idol worship. As one of the critics has put it,

‘In Jejuri’ Kolatkar does take up a position; it is one scepticism and disbelief rather than absolutely neutral one. He does not get excited anywhere in the course of the poem. He does not feel their perturbed by what he regards as superstitions, or as beliefs which have lost their value in today’s world”

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