

Arun Kolatkar's Jejuri: A Sceptical Tourist's Scrutiny of an Ancient Place of Pilgrimage

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Arun Kolatkar, a visual artist and designer by profession, is one of the significant Indian English poets. He is a major poet in Marathi as well. He has published much admired translations of the medieval Marathi poet-saint Tukaram. His chief poetical works in English are *The Boatride*, *Kala Ghoda* and *Jejuri*. *Jejuri*, a sequence of thirty-one poems about an ancient place of pilgrimage of the same name, first appeared in *Opinion Literary Quarterly* in 1974. It was published by Clearing House Publications in 1976 and won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the best book of verse of that year.

Jejuri is a small town in western Maharashtra, thirty miles from Pune, with a temple of Khandoba, an incarnation of Lord Shiva. Khandoba, also known as Malhari Martand and Mhalsakant, is one of the most popular gods in Maharashtra and Karnataka and is worshipped in all castes and communities.¹ In this long poem, Kolatkar describes the visit of Manohar, a

modern, sceptical and sensitive individual to *Jejuri* and his reactions to the incongruities, dubious practices and mercenary activities which he finds in the temple-town. Manohar, a born sceptic, is puzzled by the discrepancy between the legend and actuality of *Jejuri*. The paper attempts to study the scrutiny of an ancient place of pilgrimage through the eyes of a modern sceptical tourist and brings out his bafflement at the degenerate world he finds there. Through Manohar's varied, sometimes vague perceptions during *Jejuri's* journey, Kolatkar conveys his sense of the loss of faith and commercialisation of a place of pilgrimage.

Though Kolatkar's *Jejuri* is strikingly modern in expression, it is deeply rooted in the traditional Indian sensibility. The opening poem titled 'The Bus' brings out Manohar, the protagonist's realisation of his being different from the other pilgrims who are going to *Jejuri* for religious

reasons. Manohar is visiting Jejuri just for pleasure and out of curiosity. S. K. Desai rightly observes that Manohar goes to Jejuri not as a pilgrim but as a tourist.² While sitting in the state transport bus, Manohar sees his 'own divided face in a pair of glasses on an old man's nose' (Jejuri, p. 9) who has occupied the seat opposite to him. The expression 'divided face' seems to suggest Manohar's awareness of his lack of devotional feeling. After the sunrise, a sunbeam is seen at the driver's right temple. The poet's accurate observation and focus on particulars comes out through it. He records every visual detail with naturalistic precision and detachment. Though the poem is about a visit to a place of pilgrimage, the protagonist's absence of devotional feeling and his mocking tone make it an ironical parody of a traditional religious pilgrimage.

The next poem 'The Priest' peeps into the mind of a priest in Jejuri who is eagerly awaiting the arrival of pilgrims at the bus station. The money-minded priest is wondering whether he will find a rich pilgrim so that he can eat Puran-poli (a traditional Maharashtrian sweet-dish) from the money that he will extract from the tourist. The priest shows no consciousness of his sacred duty. Finding pilgrims, helping them in worshipping the deities and earning some money in the process has

become his daily routine. One wonders whether the services of such a priest will benefit a pilgrim at all. The expression 'his lizard stare' (Jejuri, p. 11) suggests the abhorrence that the priest creates in the mind of the poet. The priest's chewing the betel nut repeatedly works like a mantra and the bus bearing the protagonist finally arrives at the station. The exploitation of pilgrims at Jejuri is suggested through the description of the pilgrim alighting from the bus as – 'a live, ready to eat pilgrim held between its teeth'. (Jejuri, p. 11) The comparison of the pilgrim with a victim held between a cat's teeth aptly brings out Kolatkar's perception of the commercialisation and degeneration of Jejuri.

While describing Manohar's visit to the various temples in Jejuri, the poet gives great stress on visual details. The roof of Maruti's temple is broken. No one has bothered to repair it. The temple has been excluded from worship and has become the home of a mongrel bitch and her puppies. When Manohar enters the ruined temple, the bitch looks at him suspiciously. A dung beetle is scared by the clicking of a tile under a puppy's foot and takes to a frightened flight. The fact that Manohar finds a trace of divine in this decrepit temple comes out from the following lines: "No more a place of worship this place

is nothing less than the house of god.”
(Jejuri, p. 11)

The protagonist appreciates the fact that the ruined place is sheltering a bitch and her puppies. Vilas Sarang rightly remarks that we find a complex, modern sensibility saturated with irony in Kolatkar's Jejuri.³

While wandering through Jejuri, the protagonist finds that nothing is as it should be. The place is full of physical as well as moral decay. Many of the temples are in a state of dilapidation. The aridity of the place is suggested through the description of a dry water tap which looks like “a brass mouse with a broken neck”. (Jejuri, p. 14) The same idea is further stressed in the description of a reservoir built by the Peshwas. The speaker ironically comments that “There is nothing in it. Except a hundred years of silt.” (Jejuri, p. 36) The excessive aridity of the place seems to suggest its degeneration, both moral and physical. Kolatkar is not debunking religion at all. He faithfully presents the reality of Jejuri through the consciousness of Manohar, his protagonist. The speaker notices even the tiniest of the details. Even the trivialities are made interesting by viewing them in detail. What seems like a doorstep is latter discovered to be a pillar fallen on its side. A heavy medieval door is found to be hanging on one hinge alone. The speaker even takes notice of a pair of shorts drying upon the

temple door. It is an apt comment on the utter disregard some of the natives show to their heritage.

The poem ‘A Low Temple’ describes Manohar's visit to a temple situated in a cave. The matchbox in his pocket allows him to observe the bronze statue of a goddess. The poet has given a beautiful picture of the temple becoming visible and invisible gradually along with the burning and extinguishing of a matchstick in the following lines:

“One by one the gods come to light.

Amused bronze. Smiling stone.
Unsurprised.

For a moment the length of a matchstick

Gesture after gesture revives and dies.” (Jejuri, p. 17)

On being questioned about the identity of the goddess, the priest replies that she is the eight armed goddess. The speaker's flippancy is apparent in his arguing with the priest that the goddess had eighteen arms. The priest's indifference is conveyed through his not bothering to clear the speaker's confusion. When the speaker comes out of the cave, he sees a twenty foot long stone tortoise. Some children are playing on the tortoise's back. Actually the tortoise represents Lord Vishnu's incarnation, the ‘Kurma Avataar’. But its significance seems to have been forgotten.

There are many myths and legends connected to Jejuri. Manohar is told about one of the myths when he visits the horseshoe-shaped shrine. The nick in the rock is supposed to be created by the striking of a hoof of Lord Khandoba's horse. Next, Manohar spots an open door. Hoping to find another temple, he approaches it and peers inside. He is bemused to find a calf inside as it is a cowshed. The juxtaposition of holy temples and an ordinary cowshed throws light on Manohar's irreverent attitude towards Jejuri.

The poem 'An Old Woman' deals with Manohar's encounter with a pestering hag. She offers to take him to the horseshoe shrine in return of a fifty paise coin. Though Manohar tells her that he has already seen that temple, she doesn't leave him alone. She holds his sleeve and tags along. The incident throws light on an everyday occurrence in Indian places of pilgrimage. But there is a pathetic side too, to this situation. When the old woman draws the protagonist's attention to her wretched condition, his anger melts away. He notices the cracks around her eyes and on her skin. Suddenly he feels a great pity for her. He gives her more money than she had asked for. Kolatkar skilfully describes the change that comes in the protagonist's attitude towards the old woman with the

help of the devices of repetition and exaggeration in the following lines:

“And the hills crack.

And the temples crack

And the sky falls

with a plateglass clatter

around the shatter proof crone

who stands alone.” (Jejuri, p. 22)

The poet's skill of capturing the abstract qualities of a scene comes out through this surrealistic description.

There are three poems titled 'Chaitanya' dealing with the medieval saint Chaitanya's visit to Jejuri with the intention of reforming it. An intellectual's response to traditional beliefs is contrasted with the living faith of the saint in these poems. They stress the ability of the medieval poet-saints to perceive the divine in ordinary life. Following lines show that saint Chaitanya's teachings had no impact on Jejuri:

“the hills remained still

When Chaitanya

Was passing by

A cowbell tinkled

When he disappeared from view

And the herd of legends

Returned to its grazing.” (Jejuri, p. 22)

Chaitanya did not think that it was necessary to paint the stone gods of Jejuri with colours. His devotion did not require any such ritual. A simple decoration with

flowers was sufficient for him. His efforts to reform Jejuri and get rid of its outworn traditions did not bear fruit. This is suggested through the comparison of the people of Jejuri to herds of cows which returned to their activity of grazing after saint Chaitanya's departure.

The poem 'Hills' brings out Kolatkar's perception of Jejuri's deadness which is in total contrast to that of Chaitanya's. The unpleasant features of the Jejuri landscape which had been suggested in the poem 'An Old Woman' in the words 'hills as wretched as these' are described in great detail in this poem. The expressions like 'sand blasted shoulders bladed with shale', 'cactus thrust up through ribs of rock' and 'kneequartz limestone loins' aptly bring out the lack of natural vitality in this degenerate world. The cutting irony in the description of the arid and desolate hills seems to suggest that often in the hype over the religious heritage of a sacred place of pilgrimage, we forget its harsh reality. The poet scratches the glossy surface to bring out the real bleak picture. He flags some of the key problems such as extreme poverty, lack of basic amenities, regressive religious practices, commercialisation and dilapidation which need to be addressed to preserve the sanctity of this place.

The priest's son works as the protagonist's guide as there are vacations

in his school. He informs the protagonist that the five hills around Jejuri stand for the five demons killed by Khandoba. Manohar is doubtful of this claim. He questions the boy whether he really believes in that legend. The priest's son evades answering and draws the speaker's attention towards a yellow butterfly. The butterfly is surrounded by unsavoury features such as 'scruffy dry grass burnt brown in the sun' and the 'wretched hills'. But the speaker finds its natural vitality superior to the hills and temples of Jejuri which represent deadness of convention. M.K. Naik observes that the butterfly has certain crucial attributes like life, vitality and vivacity which the temple and all its legendary associations seem to be devoid of.⁴ The speaker ironically remarks that there is no story behind that butterfly but the tiny creature has covered the hills under its wings.

The poem 'A Scratch' mocks at the tendency of converting various stones into gods by linking different myths to them. The speaker is told that Khandoba had struck his wife with his sword once in a fit of rage. He is shown a crack in a big stone and told that it is Khandoba's wife turned to stone. The speaker comments ironically:

“what is god
And what is stone
The dividing line
If it exists

Is very thin
 At Jejuri...
 Scratch a rock
 And a legend springs” (Jejuri, p.

28)

The tendency of unprincipled people to gather wealth misusing religion is highlighted here. The speaker’s disgust of the decrepitude, commercialisation, mercenary activities and dubious practices which he finds in Jejuri comes out through it.

‘Ajamil and the Tigers’ stresses the need of harmony in human life which is missing in Jejuri. Ajamil, a shepherd and a wise man, keeps a sheep dog to protect his flock. The sheep dog guards the sheep carefully and the tigers go hungry for many days. They complain to the tiger king who plans an attack on the sheep dog. But the dog is too powerful for them and imprisons them. He takes the tiger king and other tigers to Ajamil. The tiger king lies to Ajamil that he had come to make peace with him. Ajamil pretends to believe him and signs a friendship treaty with the tiger king. It was because Ajamil knew that even tigers have to be fed at times. Thus he preserves nature’s balance. M.K. Naik aptly comments that though Ajamil defeats the tiger king, he ensures that the tigers don’t starve for want of sheep to eat and thus shows an awareness of the need for harmony in a life full of conflict and

discord.⁵ Thus Kolatkar seems to suggest that there was harmony in ancient ways of belief and value system which is sadly missing in contemporary world.

The poems ‘A Song for a Vaghya’ and ‘A Song for a Murli’ throw light on the practice of dedicating men and women to the service of Khandoba and the degradation which has engulfed this tradition. Vaghya, the male Khandoba dedicator, carries turmeric and oil required for Khandoba’s worship in a bag made up of tiger skin. He is entirely dependent for his living on the benevolence of Khandoba’s worshippers. The practice of dedicating spinsters as Murlis, the female Khandoba dedicators, comes under a scathing attack from the protagonist. He refers to their turning to prostitution in order to earn their living in the following lines:

“keep your hands off Khandoba’s woman

You old lecher

Let’s see the colour of your money first” (Jejuri, p. 35)

The same idea is further emphasised in the poem ‘Between Jejuri and the Railway Station’ in which the speaker indirectly refers to the indulgence of Murlis in prostitution by mentioning ‘the temple dancer who owes her prosperity to another skill’. (Jejuri, p. 50)

Before entering the inner sanctum of Lord Khandoba's temple, the male devotees are required to take their shirts off. The protagonist's companion, Makarand, refuses to follow this custom. He prefers to be in the courtyard smoking a cigarette. When Manohar enters the central shrine, he notices the same signs of neglect and decay that he had found everywhere in Jejuri. This is indicated through the description of a rat moving around in the temple and on the statue of Khandoba. Manohar's action of following the rat's movements instead of paying homage to Lord Khandoba brings out his attitude of complete irreverence to the warrior god. Instead of kneeling down in front of Nandi – the holy bull and traditional vehicle of Lord Shiva, Manohar strokes his horn and thumps him on the back. M.K. Naik rightly comments that all the reactions of Manohar to Jejuri manifestly show him to be a typical modern sceptic.⁶ Manohar's emotional withdrawal and his wry comments make his ironic stance quite clear. The greediness of the unprincipled priest in the central shrine is conveyed through the trace of a smile on his face on observing the copious offerings of a teenage bride on Lord Shiva's idol, the Shivalinga.

The poem 'The Cupboard' records the protagonist's observation of gold gods kept in a cupboard whose broken glass is

held together with the pieces of an old newspaper. The presence of the gold idols in the background of the stock exchange quotations in the newspaper is suggestive of the mammon worship of some unscrupulous people in the field of religion. The juxtaposition of the newspaper title promising eternal youth and the gold gods exposes the insincere claims made by such people to attract people towards them. The next poem 'Yeshwant Rao' further exposes the false promises made on god's behalf to attract more and more devotees. The god Yeshwant Rao is famed for curing the broken bones. The statue of Yeshwant Rao, however, has no hands and feet. Following lines fully bring out the protagonist's sceptical and ironic attitude towards Yeshwant Rao's speciality of curing broken bones:

"He'll make you whole in your body
And hope your spirit will look after itself.
He is merely a kind of bone setter.
The only thing is,
As he himself has no heads, hands and feet,
He happens to understand you a little better." (Jejuri, p. 46)

The dynamism and vitality in natural life is contrasted with conventional religion's inability to discover the divine in ordinary life in the poem 'Between Jejuri and the Railway Station'. While going

from Jejuri to Railway Station, the speaker has a glimpse of some cocks and hens jumping and dancing in a field of jowar. The sight of the happy and dancing fowls has such a tremendous impact on Manohar that he is unable to move from his place. Following lines clearly illustrate this:

“What has stopped you in your tracks
 And taken your breath away
 Is the sight
 Of a dozen cocks and hens in a field of
 jowar
 In a kind of harvest dance.”
 (Jejuri, p. 51)

The temple town with its three hundred pillars, five hundred steps, eighteen arches and the sixty-three priests did not affect him as much as the dance of the fowls did. Bruce King aptly comments: “The dancing chickens, like the butterfly and mongrel puppies, stand for a divine quality in life which the legends of Jejuri represent but which has been lost among its ruins and commercialization.”⁷ Thus the life interest and value which are not found in the degenerate milieu of Jejuri by the protagonist are discovered in the vigour and joy of the dancing fowls.

In the last poem of Jejuri ‘The Railway Station’, the temple town of Jejuri which represents religion is juxtaposed with the railway station which stands for the modern civilisation. By drawing parallels between Jejuri and the railway station,

Kolatkhar shows that both suffer from the same defects. The protagonist wants to know when the next train is due. The young waiter at the tea stall, the booking clerk as well as the station master do not care to answer him. Even the station indicator and clock are not in working order. The decay and neglect which the protagonist had found in Jejuri is found in the railway station also. Bruce King observes that the deadening incompetence found at the railway station from which the speaker attempts to leave Jejuri is similar to the lack of spirit and vitality in the ruined, commercialised for tourists temple complex of Jejuri.⁸ The similarity between Jejuri and the railway station is indicated through the use of religious imagery in its description. Thus the station indicator is addressed as ‘a wooden saint’ and the station dog is said to be ‘doing penance for the last three hundred years’. ‘The eight armed railway timetable’ reminds us of the eight armed goddess in ‘A Low Temple’. The station master and the young waiter at the tea stall remind us of the priest and his son. Through this parallelism, Kolatkhar juxtaposes the modern civilisation with ancient religious tradition and brings out the defects in both.

According to Vilas Sarang, the poem ‘The Priest’s Son’ is a parable of the poet and just like the priest’s son who evades answering the question whether he

believes in the Jejurian legends, the poet also looks away when the choice is clearly set between Jejuri on one hand and the railway station on the other hand.⁹ Thus 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.”¹⁰ 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. He has recorded every visual detail accurately focussing on the incongruities and has expressed his puzzlement over them. He finds traces of divine even in this degenerate milieu in the natural vitality of the butterfly and the dancing chickens. Similarly, the ruined temple which is sheltering a bitch and her puppies appears sacred to him. Thus he asserts the superiority of a natural harmonious world as against the defective man-made civilisation. The cutting irony in the description of the dilapidated temples, the eight armed goddess, the Khandoba dedicators, the temple rat playing on Khandoba’s statue and Yeshwantrao’s statue makes his scepticism quite clear.

References

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