

Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* : A Critical Analysis

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Abstract. Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* (1976) is an ironic comment on the present-day condition of Hinduism. The rational, secular protagonist finds Jejuri environment steeped in commercial values, the dilapidation and general decadence that oppress the poet's sensibility. The poet's ironic treatment of the Jejuri scene evinces us that at Jejuri there is little scope to cultivate spirituality. The modernity has snared Jejuri environment. The result has been the decay of the ancient Hindu spirituality. The poet finds that the temples, the priests, the attendants and also the Gods have lost their sanctity and the devotees who expect renewal of mind by material interests get exploited through many religious agencies. The devotees face more burdens than the free course of their dialogue with God. Kolatkar's satire, ridicule and ironic treatment of Jejuri scene suggest the acute sense of the deterioration of the Hinduism in the present day. Naturally, this criticism paradoxically recalls to us our spiritual enrichment in the past. The Jejuri vision offers us the idea of the reintegration of Hindu spirituality by guarding it from the modern evil practices and thereby, the achievement of the consolidation of Hindu community.

Keywords : Commercial values; decadence; spiritual enrichment; reintegration.

Jejuri, published in 1976, and in the space of forty three years, it has received overwhelming response from the readers all over India. The present paper is an attempt to provide a fresh outlook on this poem. It is a long song that unfolds the scenes of 'miin at Jejuri'. It explores this theme in all its aspects and provides a comprehensive critical statement about it.

The poem, comprising of thirty-one sections, has the design of a pilgrimage—the arrival at the holy place, the rounds of visits and the returns. The pilgrim and the pilgrimage are designed to reveal the absence of God-worship and the spiritual aridity of a place full of gods. At the end there is no vision of God or of anything of divine aspect. The poem fluctuates between faith and scepticism in a tradition that has run away from its course.

The writing of the *Jejuri* was the demand of the changed socio-cultural milieu of India in order to bring into focus the reality of jaded religious faith. In this respect, S.C. Harrex observes, "If for the Hindu pilgrim the path to illumination is non-attachment, then for the poetic artist too, a detached impersonal medium enables him to see not simply an externalised image of himself but a thing in its ephemeral or left-over essence. Hence Jejuri—an ancient place of pilgrimage in a modern, sceptical world—is a fit subject for the artist who wants to see and know life in the two fundamental forms—spiritual and material—that civilizations have expressed themselves." (Harrex, 162)

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Jejuri exploits an age-old poetic theme of pilgrimage. Manohar, the protagonist narrator, makes a trip along with friend, Makarand to Jejuri, a place of pilgrimage some thirty miles from Pune in Maharashtra and the God to whom it is dedicated is one of the most popular ones in Maharashtra and Karnataka—known variously as “Khandoba”, “Mallari” and “Mallukhan” to the Muslim devotees. Manohar is a modern educated, rational (and hence sceptical) man—an average educated Indian of today—and he goes to Jejuri in quest of enlightenment, but his analytical mind discovers the place devoid of any religious sanctity and awe-inspiring mysticism. All he notices there is aridity, ugliness, squalor, decay, dilapidation, ignorance, absurdity, materialism and perversion. The real thematic significance of the book consists in the protagonist’s sensibility and his rational attitude and reaction not only to the external reality of Jejuri temple but also to a played-out faith and to the decadent and materialistic aspects of Hinduism. *Jejuri* thus offers a commentary on spiritual hollowness and a profound statement on what is dead, yet alive, in Indian society.

The book opens with “The Bus” which brings the pilgrim to Jejuri in the rainy dawn. He looks at his divided face in the spectacles of an old man sitting opposite to him in the bus. The divided image of the protagonist in the glasses is indicative of a division in the ‘self of the protagonist’. Imprisoned within tarpaulin screens, the pilgrim has nothing else to see than his own ‘divided face’ reflected in the spectacles of the old man sitting opposite to him. The destination seems to be ‘Just beyond the caste mark between his eyebrows’, a hint that the pilgrim wishes to go beyond the externalities of religion. He has obviously a goal and a purpose which is beyond religion of which the caste mark is symbol. The latter stanzas of the poem introduce the purpose of the poet, how he is going to approach the religious subject matter in the book. He establishes his stance as an observer and prepares the reader for that, the theme he is going to present through the observation and response of the protagonist who is an average educated Indian-modern, rational, scientific and sceptical. And that is why the poet writes at the end of the poem:

At the end of the bumpy ride
with your own face on either side
when you get off the bus
you don’t step inside the old man’s head. (*Jejuri*, 9)

The concluding line of the poem, designed to warn the reader, does not expect any conventional, religion oriented response from the present-day, city-dwelling protagonist. Naturally, the protagonist’s observations are realistic and matter for the present only. The poem is actually about the spiritual journey of the city-bred man to the temple at Jejuri. The irony of the entire work lies in the fact that it is a pilgrimage without any religious or spiritual purpose or vision and the pilgrim shows little interest in the presence of so many gods in the place. On the contrary, the protagonist shows spiritual decay of the place. This indirectly indicates

the protagonist's allegiance with Hindu religion and mysticism. P.S. Rege in his Marathi article titled "Jejuri" opines:

What was the purpose of this pilgrimage to Jejuri?
Was it a tour or an attempt to recover what we had
lost? Of course, we find that it was not made in
superstition and yet, we go on feeling that
something in the poet is still fondling the old, the
decadent and the broken. (Translated from Marathi
version, 184)

The poet's attempt to recover the past enrichment is "brought out through the ironic presentation of Jejuri". The indirect purpose is to set right the Hinduism which is engulfed by the material interests and where spirituality is withering away.

In the poems, "The Priest" and "The Heart of Ruin", the poet hints at the spiritual decay. Here, through the character of the present-day priest, the poet indicates the onslaught of materialism on religion and on its sanctum. When he sees the bus he thinks, "Will there be a puran poli in his plate?" (10) and when "the bus takes a pathole as it rattles past the priest", it "paints his eyeballs blue". The stare of the priest for the bus is compared with 'lizard-stare' and also with a 'catgrin stare'. The vacuous but expectant stare of the priest is relieved when the bus arrives and one notices his animal desire:

Stops inside the bus station and stands purring
softly in front of the priest. A catgrin on its face
and a live, ready to eat pilgrim held between its
teeth (11)

The tendency of the priest is almost like a cannibal—"ready to eat pilgrim". Moreover, the priest is sacrilegious; for him, there is no difference between chanting of a mantra and turning over and over of a piece of betel nut. All these observations indicate the spiritual decay at Jejuri.

The various temples on the hill betray different stages of dilapidation and neglect. The temples are in the ruinous state and gods seem to be most ineffective and irrelevant. The irony arises out of the suggested and supposed power of gods and their actual state. The roof comes down on Maruti's head/ nobody seems to mind. Least of all Maruti himself (12). This Maruti is Veer Maruti symbolising the protector god of village. He, however, has not been able to protect his own head from the falling roof. The mongrel bitch has made the temple her habitat and to Kolatkar's mind this is quite 'unsacred'. In another ruined temple, 'a pillar on its side' serves as a door step. For traditional devotee every object in the temple exists at two levels. One is the material level which the protagonist can very well see and share with the devotees. The other level transforms a mundane object into a religious, spiritually-informed object. This level is not at all accessible to the

protagonist. In “The Low Temple” (13) the gods who should bring light are themselves enveloped by darkness. Of the goddess in “The Low Temple”, the narrator’s rational mind demands that if she is called ‘Ashtabhuja’—the eight armed one—she should actually be represented with eight arms only. The discrepancy between the name of goddess and the actual idol with eighteen arms is irritating to him. The priest’s insistence that she is *e* ‘Ashtabhuja’ all the same brings out the priest’s ignorance. The irony in the poem suggests the hollowness and meaninglessness of the myths of Hindu goddess.

The poet’s ironic and sardonic tone becomes bitter while passing through the temple complex. The poem turns out to be a record of his impressions of the gods, temples, men, animals and rodents. It is a dismal picture we get of the temples in ruins with poor lighting and water supply and a swarm of beggars. This is the world of Jejuri where the spirituality is on the wane, “Water supply” offers a picture of “a dry water tap” which looks like “a brass mouse with a broken neck”. (14) The words ‘broken’ and ‘dry’ add to the narrator’s perception of Jejuri as a sterile and degenerate place. “The Reservoir”, like “Water Supply”, again underscores the existing aridity of the wasteland that Jejuri is. The Reservoir was built by the Peshwas, and now:

There is nothing in it.
Except a hundred years of silt. (36)

The Reservoir appears to be a possible symbol for a permanent draught, a state of utter lifelessness.

The religious and spiritual decay becomes the object of satire in the poems like “The Temple Rat”, “The Cupboard”, “Yashwantrao” and “The Door”. The triviality of the places is hinted when the narrator finds the temple rat sitting on the mighty shoulders of Lord Malhari, the ‘warrior god’, fearlessly. “The Cupboard” is an ironical comment on the ‘golden gods’ kept in a row behind the broken glass which is held together by the editorial of the English Newspaper. “Yashwantrao” is a god of mundane matters rather than a god who will take care of one’s spiritual matters. The mundane and pragmatic attitude is further intensified in “The Door”. The medieval door of the main temple has lost its spiritual quality and turned into mundane quality as the priests make use of this medieval door for their shorts’ to dry upon its shoulders. All this oppresses the sensibility of the narrator.

One meets not only gods but also several individuals on one’s trip to Jejuri along with the narrator. These individuals intensify religious decay and this is the major preoccupation of the narrator. As the narrator moves around an old woman hobbles around, pulling at his shirt sleeve. “An Old Woman” is a memorable portrait of a woman who desperately tries to retain her dignity by suggesting that she would take the narrator to the horseshoe shrine in return for a fifty paise coin.

The narrator regards her just as a pestering beggar and wants to end the 'farce'. He turns to face her with finality :

And as you look on,
the cracks that begin around her eyes
spread beyond her skin.
And the hills crack and the temples crack.
And the sky falls.
With a plateglass clatter
around the shatter proof crone
who stands alone. (22)

As the narrator looks at her, the hills, the sky and everything around and beyond her shatters and collapses. The woman herself is 'shatterproof' whereas the narrator is reduced to a small change in her hand. The "cracks" of the beggar woman get identified with the general aridity of the wasteland of Jejuri and with the dilapidation of the temples therein.

"The Priest's Son" is another effective portrait. He acts as a guide to the narrator, since his school has vacation. When the narrator asks him if he believes in the legends of the place, "he doesn't reply but merely looks uncomfortable, shrugs and looks away" (27). The boy trapped in the process of commercialization avoids the answer and cleverly switches the subject saying, "look there's a butterfly/ there". (27) The boy is as ignorant as the priest.

The portraits of "Vaghya" and "Murli", though ardent devotees of God Khandoba are contaminated by the modernity and material interests. The monotonous life of Vaghya serves as a comment on the general decay at Jejuri. The image of "Murli" is an offshoot of the decadence of the religious place. Though she is part of religious aspect of Jejuri, she freely involves in amoral things.

The world of Jejuri constitutes different types of stones. For the devotee, the stones and hills at Jejuri bring impressions on two levels—religious, mythological and physical levels. But for the narrator, they are mere stones which intensify the aridity of the land and in general, the deadness of the spiritual and religious spirit at Jejuri. This theme gets bold assertion in "A Scratch", "Hills", and "A Little File of Stones".

The poet's ironic tone asserts in "A Scratch", "What is god and what is stone the dividing line if it exists is very thin at Jejuri" (28). The soil on the hill is not fertile, so the 'crop' that is harvested all the season is that of the 'stone' gods and dead legends. And naturally, the distinction is very thin between the stones and gods at Jejuri. Moreover, all stone gods are related to Khandoba, part of his family.

The first of “Chaitanya” poems (16), tries to say that a stone is a stone whether plain or painted red. The persona in the poem offers to bring flowers if the stone could wipe off the paint. The saffron of the Zendu flowers is attractive enough. The second “Chaitanya” poem (23) emphasises the transformation from grapestones to stones to gods. The poet intends to suggest the aridity of the place rather than anything else. The last “Chaitanya” poem clearly expresses a sense of regret for timeless continuation of the same old tradition at Jejuri. The poet writes:

a herd of legends
on 'a hill slope ..
looked up from its grazing
when Chaitanya came in sight
The hills remained still
and the herd of legends
when Chaitanya
was passing by
a cowbell twinkled
when he disappeared from view
returned to its grazing. (49)

Chaitanya Mah'aprabhu visited Jejuri with the reformist zeal in 1510. It is suggested that the social reforms introduced by Chaitanya were short lived and legends 'graze' on hills once more. The comparison of the legends with sheep—docile, unchanging animal - is very meaningful. These “Chaitanya” poems give impetus to the narrator's observations at Jejuri. They offer the message that from Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's time Jejuri has been waiting for the spiritual revival.

The futility of the narrator's pilgrimage and meaninglessness of the things he has observed results into his deep despair. The narrator's quest for enlightenment was absolutely vain:

You've left the town behind
with a coconut in your hand,
a priest's visiting card in your pocket
and a few questions knocking about
in your head. (50)

This is the predicament of every modern man which makes him accept the divine (coconut) and mundane (visiting card) at the same time. This very situation alienates the narrator from *Jejuri*. Irony helps the poet to present the objective picture of Jejuri and to express his sense of estrangement. The Jejuri environment creates anguish in his mind and his modern consciousness is engaged in restoring the divine aspect above the mundane and meaningless rituals.

The poet's response to the Jejuri landscape points out that the Hindu culture has been lost among its ruins and commercialization is responsible for the relentless spiritual and religious decay. This message has been projected through the ruinous temples, gods, priests, Vaghaya, Murli, beggar woman, animals and hills. The narrator with his implied ironic tone criticises the material aspects, dilapidation and general decay and deadness to indicate loss of religious and spiritual atmosphere at Jejuri. The alienation in Jejuri is less from the gods as from institutionalised religion. The basic purpose of the poet is to castigate the material evils which have invaded the religious rituals at Jejuri and at the same time the ignorance, the negligence and the very aridity of the land turning it into a religious wasteland. Parody is the other tool employed by the poet to criticise the orthodox customs and rituals in Jejuri.

Jejuri is an eye-opening experience, for the Hindus, of the crumbling pillars of Hinduism in the form of Jejuri. This realization is intended to awaken the people to reintegrate Hinduism once again on the basis of the divine and spiritual purpose. This nationalistic purpose is implied in Kolatkar's criticism of Jejuri. As S.C. Harrex observes, "Jejuri can be read as modem, slightly ironic, version of bhakti poetry." (164) N.P. Acharya too observes, "*Jejuri* is the most 'Indian' book ' of poems in English I have ever read. Indian in its images, in its themes and insights and even in its rhythms." (17-24) The poem points out the way to the future, precisely because it has a firm hold on a specific tradition.

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