

FAITH AND SCEPTICISM IN KOLHATKAR'S JEJURI

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ABSTRACT

Ancient Indian culture and tradition have made Indians religious minded. The Indians believe in prayer and penance, fasting and pilgrimage. As Tennyson said, "More things are wrought by prayer than the world dreams of." The Cultural attitude of the people is revealed in their regular visits to various temples. Kolahtkar has described the line of thinking of pilgrims and their experiences in the efficacy of prayer and pilgrimage. There are, however, some visitors who are not ready to swallow everything uncritically. They are suspicious about the attributes endowed to gods and goddesses.

Keywords: Culture and Tradition, Pilgrims, Efficacy, Pilgrimage

INTRODUCTION

Jejuri, with several Sections, highlights modern urban scepticism impinging upon ancient religious tradition. Is the religious quest the chief motive behind the protagonist's journey to Jejuri? This motive seems to be evident in the poems which describe the poet's visit the Jejuri and the hill-temple of Khandoba, an incarnation of Lord Shiva who is also known as Malhari Martand. This town is fifty kilometers south-east of Pune and is the most prominent temple in Western Maharashtra. The God Khandoba is worshipped by all castes and communities and has Muslim devotees as well.

The visit to Jejuri is completed in half a day, starting early in the morning and ending in the late evening. Thousands visit Jejuri with a spirit of worship which this modern visitor lacks.

The non-involvement of the visitor is discernible at the very beginning of the poem "The Bus" where the protagonist travels with an old man in the bus going to Jejuri. The poet, while depicting the old man as seated beside the protagonist in the bus, is trying to bring forth a conflict between the traditional Hindu religious faith and the modern value system. The old man's destination is well-defined by the "caste-mark between his eyebrows"¹ The protagonist cannot step beyond the casts-mark, because he has not such well-defined spiritual destination but has some few questions oppressing him. Shirish Chindhade question," Is it tarpaulin flap that precludes a penetration beyond the symbolic caste-mark? In traditional Hinduism metaphysical ignorance is said to pose a curtain between the devotee and the deity, the same way as the tarpaulin flap prevents glimpses of landscape outside the bus"²

The journey to the religious town is made state transports bus which is comparatively a comfortable mode of conveyance, in view of the fact that most devotees choose to walk

miles together to Jejuri. Later in the poem, the protagonist seems to be rendered incapable to stepping “inside the old man’s head” with the caste-mark which symbolizes deep devotion. It is at this point that a question can be raised. How far does “Jejuri” appeal as an analysis of the Hindu religious and spiritual sensibility for which India is traditionally know?

The experience of the protagonist here is very different from the kind of sensibility defined by other writers where it “exalts minds and makes all the burden light”. The impersonal approach in the poem is further enhanced by the use of a persona referred to in phrases like “you look down” “you search for”, your own divided face”³ “you seem to move”⁴ This works as an effective device to detach the modern pilgrim from the state of a heightened religious sensibility defined in Nissim Ezekeiel’s “Enterprise”. The modern sensibility of the protagonist to blunted by forces of rationalism and skepticism with the result that there is an incapacity to see roots of traditional culture.

The Poem “An Old Women” speaks of the Jejuri ethos and culture. In “The Bus” the poet depicts an old man. Here it is an old woman. With the repetitive use of the word “old”, It seems that the poet wishes to emphasize the contrast between the old and the new. The old stands for the cultural or the traditional where as the new of the modern is symbolic of the rational of the intellectual in order to be religious.

The old women in kolatkar’s poem has no official status but is a self-appointed guide whose only excuse is to pester pilgrims. The poet says:

She wants a fifty paise coin.

She says she will take you to the horseshoe shrine⁵

Which the protagonist has already visited. The above lines bring forth the socio-economic status of India, where even a fifty paisa coin is precious to the old woman. The age-old materialistic outlook attached to the sticky like a “burr” and the question she asks later in the poem is disturbing:

What else can an old women do

On hills as wretched as these?⁶

She may be a one time Murali or devadasi, now old. Therefore now she is without any commercial prospects. Kolatkar here describes the decay and the ruin of the old religious order. He says,

The cracks that begin around her eyes

Spread beyond her skin⁷

It is towards the end of the poem that the poet admits how he became the victim of compulsion.

...you are reduced

To so much small change

In her hand.⁸

In “Makarand”, there is a contrast which is built up by kolatkar between spiritual faith depicted by the “you” and personal response. The protagonist,s exasperation is noticeable.

Take my shirt off
And go in there to do pooja ?
No thanks.
Not me
But you go right ahead
If that is what you want to do
Give me the matchbox
Before you go,
Will you?
I will be out in the courtyard
Where no one will mind it
If I smoke.⁹

The visitor of the modern pilgrim is detached from the scene to the extent that he regards smoking as more rewarding than performing pooja.

There is a confident confirmation about the preference of the protagonist. The burning of incense and the lighting of cigarette by the same matchbox are in sharp contrast,. One illuminates through faith whereas the other simply burns itself to further decay. They throw light on the poet’s intention of pointing out the larger contrast at Jejuri—mainly, the slowly wearing off of ancient faith vis-à-vis an impatient modern sensibility. The metropolitan intellectual sensibility is encounter with orthodox culture. The total collapse of modern religious sensibility is suggested here.

The “Chaitanya section which refers to the 15 century reveals how the “return to the past makes no difference to the protagonist’s scepticism. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the noted Bengali Vaishnava saint, whom some worship as an incarnation of Krishna, is said to have visited Jejuri around 1510. He exhorted the Murali to mend their ways, as a result of which a Murali named Indira, is supposed to have reformed herself. In the first of these two section, Chaintanya’s attitude to the stones of Jejuri is described. He found these stones god-like even without the red paint and “sweet as grapes”. But the last section of “Chiaitanya” makes it clear that the visit of the saint has made no difference to the place. The ignorant ones, like the protagonist, experience a discomfort.

He popped a stone
in his mouth
and spat out gods.¹⁰

Is ‘Jejuri’ about a cultural or a spiritual quest? Is it about a need for faith?

S.K.Desai says, "The protagonist goes to Jejuri not as a seeker... not as a pilgrim....He is a kind of a traveller.... a tourist"(48-49)¹¹

When asked by an interviewer whether he believed in God, Kolatkar's answered,"I leave the question alone.I don't think I have to take a position about the God, one way or the other"¹² "Jejuri" may be understood as a confrontation between the ancient religious tradition and the modern industrial civilization—the latter overpowering the old religious order.

CONCLUSION

Arun Kolatkar, as a twentieth century poet, ends on the note of doubt and scepticism which does not convey sense of closer finality but leaves the issue open ended. Here lies the richness of meaning which is attached to 'Jejuri'. R. Parthasarthy's observation regarding the poem is quit succinct and precise. He says, "Apparently it is about the poet's irreverent odyssey to the temple of Khandoba at Jejuri....In reality, however the poem oscillates between faith and scepticism in a tradition that has run its course"¹³ The poet's pilgrimage is an odyssey of exploration.But the facts remains that the information he got from the priest failed to quench his queries. The poet made a sincere study of the spot without assuming the role either of a theist or an atheist. Poet arrived at conclusion based on logical thinking and critical analysis.It is erroneous to assume that Kolatkar bore a grudge against people with ecclesiastical attitude.

REERENCES

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