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**FAITH AND ESCEPTICISM IN ARUN KOLATKAR'S *JEJURI*: A STUDY**

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**Abstract:**

*The present research paper throws light on faith and scepticism in Arun Kolatkar's collection *Jejuri*. The poet visits *Jejuri* and keenly observes the place and people there. The devotees visit the holy place with faith but the poet's views are sceptical. The speaker raises questions on the very existence of God in form of idols. On the one side, the pilgrims visit the holy place with faith and on the hand, the poet becomes sceptical about the existence of God. The poet ridicules the myths regarding gods and goddesses. There is a thin line between faith and superstition. For the believers, there is God in the idol but for the non-believers, it is merely a stone. For the discussion of faith and scepticism, the following selective poems are studied: *The Bus, A Low Temple, Heart of Ruin, An Old Woman, A Scratch, Chaitanya, Makarandand Yeshwant Rao*.*

**Keywords:** *Faith, Scepticism, Religion, Myth, God, etc.*

Arun Kolatkar is a bilingual author who writes in Marathi and English languages. His first collection of poetry entitled as *Jejuri* appeared in 1976 which gained the attention of critics and readers throughout the literary world. While talking to a poet Kolatkar disclosed some facts about the source of his *Jejuri* poems. As he told, he read a book about temples in Maharashtra and instantly decided to visit the holy place *Jejuri* along with his brother, and one friend. This real visit to *Jejuri* must have helped him to depict in detailed information of about the religious place. He made keen observations of *Jejuri*, the pilgrims, every part of the *Jejuri*. *Jejuri* is a holy place of Hindu devotees where the temple of God *Khandoba* is situated. So, the place is known as *Jejuri of Khandoba*. *Khandoba* is considered to be the incarnation of Lord *Shiva*, one of the supreme gods of the trinities in Hinduism. *Khandoba* is fifty km from *Pune* in Maharashtra state. Every day, a large number of devotees visit the holy place and offer their worship to Lord *Khandoba*. All the devotees show their immense faith in the myths about the god and goddesses in *Jejuri*. Generally, no believer can raise questions on the existence of God and challenge his invisible authority. The pilgrims visit the place with full faith for the blessings of Lord *Khandoba*. It is believed that after visiting *Khandoba*, all the desires of the devotees are fulfilled. The material desires such as health, wealth and children are especially on demand. Anyway, the *Khandoba of Jejuri* is one of the most important religious centers in the region and thousands of devotees all over Maharashtra and India come over to seek the blessings of Lord *Khandoba*.

The poet presents his sceptic views towards God through his protagonist, the speaker. The speaker has different standpoints about Lord *Khandoba*. The speaker presents himself as a modern, rational and realistic visitor who describes the faithful and realistic picture of *Jejuri* from the scientific point of view. His tone is completely ironic, critical and sceptic while dealing with the blind faith of the people. The speaker nowhere clearly mentions that he is an atheist and does not believe in God, but indirectly he ridicules the superstition of the people and the myths spread all over *Jejuri*. The



collection Jejuri is a series of thirty-one poems which describes the pilgrimage experiences of the speaker from sunrise to sunset. Throughout the poems, one can clearly see the ironic tone of the speaker.

The pilgrim starts his experiences at the very outbreak of the day which are described in the first poem entitled *The Bus*. The poem deals with the journey of the pilgrims to Jejuri by the state transport bus. The tarpaulin covered on the bus symbolizes perhaps the blind faith of the people who visit the temple of Khandoba. The speaker casually notices an old man having 'the cast mark between his eyebrows' (Shahane,15) perhaps indicating his upper caste status in the Hindu society. The tone of the speaker gets more ironical when the bus reaches to Khandoba where the priest is waiting for the devotees as if they are his customers. The poem *The Priest* highlights the fact that the religious places have become commercial centers where different types of trades are taken place, the priest ship being one of them. The Lines 'Is the bus a little late? /The priest wonders. / Will there be a Puran Poli in his plate?' (Shahane, 4-6) signify the hypocrisy and greed of the priest who earns livelihood from the business of performing all the religious rites and rituals. The poor people across the country visit the sacred religious place but the priest is the real gainer out of this business. The poet is very critical on the commercialization of the Hindu temples and the faith of common people. The lines prove the greedy priest's selfishness in the following lines: 'Acatgrin on its face / and a live, ready to eat pilgrims/ held between its teeth' (Shahane, 31-33). The priest is as happy as a hunter who sees its prey coming close to his target. Here the image of the priest is an exploiter who is selfish and greedy.

The poem *A Low Temple* is one more poem which describes the hypocrisy of the priest. The temple is situated in a dark cave where the gods are visible one by one only in the light of the matchstick. There are bronze and stone gods. When the speaker asks the priest about the identity of one goddess, the priest replies that she is 'The eight arm goddess' (Shahane, 10). But the reality that the matchstick light shows is that the goddess has eighteen hands. The sceptic inside the speaker tries to clear his doubts but the priest is firm on his eight-hand stand. The speaker tries to point out the truth but the priest seems unmoved from his stand. When the speaker comes out of the cave, he lights the cigarette with the same matchstick. Outside, he finds the children playing on the back of the stone tortoise. The image of the tortoise is associated with Lord Vishnu in Hindu myths.

The poem *Heart of Ruin* focuses on the dilapidated temple of God Maruti. The speaker says that nobody minds the broken temple of Maruti. The speaker ironically says:

The roof comes down on Maruti's head  
nobody seems to mind  
least of all Maruti himself  
maybe he likes a temple better this way (Shahane, 1- 4).

The speaker indirectly raises questions about the very existence of God who cannot repair his own abode and protect himself. Here the god Maruti, the mongrel bitch and the puppies live together. Perhaps they like this place because of its abandoned and ruined condition, still the devotees arrive here in a large number and worship the god Maruti. The speaker is suspicious about how such type of place can be the abode of God. He says: 'No more a place of worship this place/is nothing less than the house of god' (Shahane, 21-22). In this paradoxical expression, the speaker, on one hand says that the place is not suitable to worship and on the other hand, he says that the place is 'nothing less than the house of god' (Shahane, 22). In reality, the place is not worthy to be a temple but the pilgrims show their immense faith in the temple. The line between faith and scepticism seems to be very thin because the devotees have immense faith in this temple while the sceptics raise questions about its worthiness.



The poem and *An Old Woman* deals with the pathetic plight of an old woman who wants to show the horseshoe shrine for just fifteen paise coin from the speaker. This is quite a conspicuous picture at the temples where such helpless and destitute people struggle for their livelihood. When the old woman comes to know that her efforts are in vain, she only replies: 'What else can an old woman do / on hills as wretched as these' (Shahane, 17-18). For the devotees Jejuri is a holy place of their god Khandoba, but for the impoverished people it's nothing but a wretched geographical unfertile land. Here, the old woman symbolizes the physical reality of Jejuri and the devotees show their conviction. The poem *Chaitanya* ironically describes the creation of gods in the words: 'he popped a stone/ in his mouth/ and spatout gods' (Shahane, 4-6). The poem *The Priest's Son* presents the unrealistic stories about God. The son of the priest is a schoolboy and joins his father because of his school holidays. He narrates the myth about Khandoba and his saga to the pilgrims: 'these five hills /are the five demons/ that Khandoba killed' (Shahane, 1-3). The speaker wants to test the boy and asks him if he really believes in such a myth. After this question the boy seems embarrassed and confused but he skillfully diverts the attention of the speaker towards a butterfly.

The poem *A Scratch* is quite a representative poem of the skeptical point of view of the poet. The poet attacks the blind faith of the people who worship any stone believing as gods or goddesses. The tone of the poem is highly ironical as is evident in these lines: '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' (Shahane, 1-8). The sceptic inside the poet ironically describes the picture of the 'harvest of god' in the barren land of Jejuri. The barren land harvests nothing but gives birth only to gods and goddesses. The poet ridicules the myth of the giant rock worshipped as the wife of Khandoba. The poet indirectly makes fun of the superstitious belief of people who worship stone idols as gods and goddesses. Idol worship is quite common in Hinduism but the poet harshly criticizes it in the words: 'Scratch rock/ and a legend springs' (Shahane, 23-24). The poem *Makarand* also records the unacceptable rituals of the religion. To offer pooja of lord Khandoba, the devotees have to be half naked by removing their shirts. The poet dislikes this idea and rejects to go inside the temple, rather he prefers to smoke in the courtyard. The poet wants to have some spiritual experiences but sees different ridiculous and obscure rituals at the temple. *Yeshwant Rao* is a remarkable poem about the faith and scepticism. The god Yeshwant Rao is considered to be the second-class god compared to the main god Khandoba. His place is outside the main temple, perhaps because he belongs to lower-class people and hence neglected by most of devotees. The poet compares Yashwant Rao with other pettier gods who offer physical and spiritual comfort to the devotees.

He speaks of the commercialization of god, where he compares Yashwant Rao with other prettier gods, who offer materialistic and spiritual comfort to the devotees. Moreover, compels the devotees to crawl or walk on burning coals to prove their loyalty towards him, and his rewards of impregnating the wife of a devotee or harming the enemy of the devotee. If some devotee does not offer anything to god then God ignores him. Here he comments upon the god and devotees (Web).

The poet criticizes the believers for worshipping the basalt idol as God. People visit the temples to fulfill their desires from God. To quote the poem: 'If you're short of a limb/ Yeshwant Rao will lend you a hand /and get you back on your feet' (Shahane, 41-43). Furthermore, the poet ridicules the blind and impractical view of the devotees in an ironical tone in the following words:

Yeshwant Rao  
does nothing spectacular



he doesn't promise you the earth  
or book your seat on the next rocket to heaven.  
But if any bones are broken,  
you no he'll mend them.  
He'll make you whole in your body  
and hope you are spirits will look after itself  
He is merely a kind of a bone setter.  
The only thing is,  
as he himself as no heads, hands and feet,  
he happens to understand you a little better (Shahane,44-55).

The speaker while returning from Jejuri to the railway station makes keen observation of the spiritual but materialized and commercialized city Jejuri. He visited the place to find out some spiritual facts but he experienced superstitious and irrational series of events. The poet may not be a true devotee, but the reality he finds out is that people blindly believe in God and myths which any modern rational person will disagree with.

To conclude, thousands of the devotees visit the holy place Jejuri of Khandoba. The poems *The Priest* and *A Low Temple* throws light on the commercialization of the temples and greediness of the priest. *Heart of Ruin* deals with the dilapidated Maruti temple and the mongrel bitch and her puppies. The poem *A Scratch* deals with myths about the idols. The barren land of Jejuri harvests nothing but the gods. *An Old Woman* delineates the miserable site of the old lady who wants fifteen paise from the devotee. She calls Jejuri a wretched place. *Makarand* deals with the unnecessary rite and rituals of rituals of the religion where the devotees have to remove the shirts to enter the temple. The poem *Yeshwant Rao* throws light on the second-class God who fulfils all the desires of the devotees.

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