



SACRED SPACE AND SECULAR VISION: A STYLISTIC READING OF *THE PRIEST* FROM *JEJURI*

Mr. Amol Bade¹

Research Scholar, Waghire college of Arts, Commerce and Science, Saswad, Pune, MS, India

&

Dr. Rohidas Dhakane²

Associate Professor, Waghire College of Arts Commerce and Science, Saswad, Pune, MS, India

Abstract

Jejuri (1976) by Arun Kolatkar holds a prominent position in Indian English poetry due to its modernist sensibility and unorthodox handling of faith, ritual, and sacred space. The ironic depiction of religious mediation and the slow decline of spiritual authority in "The Priest" make it stand out among the poems in the series. In order to analyse how Kolatkar creates a secular vision within a traditionally sacred setting, this paper conducts a stylistic reading of "The Priest." The study demonstrates how common language, visual detail, and subtle irony demystify the sacred and highlight human vulnerability by utilizing stylistic principles, which centre on diction, imagery, tone, syntax, and irony. In the end, the poem reflects Kolatkar's larger poetic endeavour in Jejuri, which is to challenge ingrained belief systems while paying attention to historical and cultural realities.

Keywords

Stylistic Analysis, Sacred Space, Secular Vision, Indian English Poetry, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Indian English poetry in the post-independence period witnessed a decisive shift from romantic idealism to modernist scepticism. Arun Kolatkar emerges as a central figure in this transformation, particularly through *Jejuri*, a poetic sequence inspired by his visit to the temple town of *Jejuri* in Maharashtra. Rather than offering devotional praise, Kolatkar presents a detached, observant, and often ironic perspective on religious practice and sacred geography.

The Priest, one of the notable poems in *Jejuri*, dramatizes the encounter between the speaker and a temple priest who mediates access to the divine. The poem is significant not for theological reflection but for its stylistic economy and secular gaze. Through precise diction, visual imagery, and ironic understatement, Kolatkar exposes the fragility of religious authority and the human dimension of faith. This paper seeks to stylistically analyze "*The Priest*" to illustrate how the poem navigates the tension between sacred space and secular perspective.

Arun Kolatkar and *Jejuri*: A Brief Context:

Arun Kolatkar (1932–2004) was a member of the Bombay poets group and was heavily influenced by modernist art. The Commonwealth Poetry Prize-winning *Jejuri* is made up of a series of poems that show the poet's journey through a religious landscape full of decay, doubt, and irony. Unlike traditional pilgrimage literature, *Jejuri* does not affirm faith uncritically. Instead, it explores the ambiguity of belief in a modern, disenchanted world. *The Priest* contributes to this thematic design by focusing on a religious functionary whose role is both essential and diminished. The



poem's stylistic choices reinforce this ambivalence and reflect Kolatkar's broader poetic philosophy.

Theoretical Framework: Stylistic Approach:

Stylistics examines the linguistic choices which contribute to meaning and effect in literary texts. This study employs a literary stylistics framework, drawing on:

- ✓ **Diction and register:** to analyse the use of colloquial and neutral language.
- ✓ **Syntax and structure:** to examine sentence patterns and their implications.
- ✓ **Imagery and visual detail:** to understand how physical description replaces spiritual transcendence.
- ✓ **Tone and irony:** to explore the poem's secular stance toward sacred experience. By applying these stylistic tools, the paper highlights the Kolatkar's stylistic economy which produces a powerful critique of religious mediation without overt polemic.

Stylistic Analysis of *The Priest*:

Diction and Colloquial Register:

One of the standout features of *The Priest* is its clear and conversational tone. Kolatkar intentionally avoids the grandiose or sanctimonious language often found in religious poetry. Instead, he focuses on *The Priest's* physical presence rather than his spiritual authority, presenting a straightforward and unembellished description. For example, *The Priest* is introduced not with lofty titles or reverent imagery, but simply as an ordinary, aging man:

“on an old man's nose” (Kolatkar, *The Bus*, 11).

This straightforward, no-frills sentence takes away the spiritual grandeur of the figure and instead highlights his physical state over his religious authority. The simplicity of the statement shows Kolatkar's determination not to romanticize the sacred role. Additionally, the way *The Priest's* actions are described is practical and down-to-earth:

“The bit of betel nut
turning over and over on his tongue” (Kolatkar, *The Priest*, 16-17).

Instead of emphasizing ritual purity or divine discipline, the spotlight is on our everyday habits and what we often overlook. This choice of words grounds religious practice in the fabric of daily life, hinting at a more mechanical approach to observance rather than a heartfelt spiritual commitment.

Kolatkar also employs colloquial phrasing to emphasize human frailty:

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Kolatkar sheds light on the sacred role of *The Priest* by choosing a more relatable language. He implies that faith has turned into something routine instead of being a transcendent experience, as he weaves religious practices into the everyday flow of life using common language. This approach reflects a secular perspective that avoids romanticizing rituals, showcasing simplicity in style.

Imagery and Physicality:



In *The Priest*, visual and physical imagery predominate. Instead of being a strong go-between for people and gods, *The Priest* is depicted as an elderly, frail person. His physical frailty takes center stage, subtly undermining *The Priestly* aura of holiness.

The emphasis on physical deterioration is similar to how *Jejuri's* temples are in poor condition. Sacred space is reinterpreted as delicate and fleeting, whereas it was previously thought to be permanent and associated with divine presence. Kolatkar uses tangible imagery to substitute material reality for metaphysical depth.

In *The Priest*, the imagery is rich and vivid, painting a striking picture throughout the poem. Kolatkar intentionally draws our focus away from *The Priest's* spiritual power and instead highlights his physical frailty. Rather than being portrayed as a strong link between humans and the divine, *The Priest* emerges as an aging, vulnerable figure. This shift is clear in the poet's straightforward and evocative descriptions of his physical state.

“on an old man’s nose” (Kolatar, *The Bus*, 11).

This stark visual image foregrounds age and decline rather than sacred power. The absence of symbolic or metaphorical embellishment reinforces *The Priest's* ordinary human condition. Kolatkar further emphasizes physical frailty through imagery of illness and instability:

“He’s the god you’ve got to meet,
if you’re short of a limb,
Yeshwant Rao will lend you a hand
and get you back on your feet” (Kolatar, *Yashwant Rao*, 39-42).

The shaking hands serve as a powerful symbol of decline and vulnerability. Rather than expressing divine power or ritual mastery, this image hints at a loss of physical control, subtly eroding *The Priest's* authority. Another significant physical image appears in the description of *The Priest's* feet:

“thrown against the wall,
without an arm, a leg
or even a single head” (Kolatar, *Yashwant Rao*, 36-38).

This image conveys exhaustion and collapse, reinforcing the idea that the religious figure is barely able to sustain himself physically, let alone mediate spiritual transcendence.

Syntax and Poetic Economy:

In *The Priest*, Kolatkar uses short lines and little punctuation. The poem's thematic restraint is reflected in this spare structure. The speaker's detached observation is reinforced and emotional excess is avoided by the lack of complex syntactic constructions.

The poem's economy of expression is consistent with modernist ideas, which emphasize the importance of understatement over rhetorical flourish. A fragmented faith that no longer provides coherence or certainty is also suggested by the broken syntax.

In *The Priest*, Kolatkar uses short, sharp lines and keeps punctuation to a minimum, crafting a simple structure that reflects the poem's themes of restraint. Many of the lines are complete in grammar but intentionally brief, steering clear of complicated sentence forms. For instance:

“on an old man’s nose” (Kolatar, *The Bus*, 11).



This straightforward declarative sentence is free of any modifiers or figurative language. Its simple structure emphasizes the speaker's detached, observational perspective, steering clear of any emotional weight.

The sentence is pretty straightforward, lacking any complex clauses or figurative language. Its simple structure keeps the focus on tangible facts instead of deeper spiritual meanings. The poem also includes fragmented, paratactic statements such as:

“without an arm, a leg” (Kolatkhar, Yashwant Rao, 37).

When placed in isolation, the line gains significance through subtlety instead of detailed explanation. The absence of connecting words hints at a fragmented or unfinished vision, which resonates with the poem's secular perspective. Minimal punctuation further contributes to poetic economy. Lines follow one another without commas or conjunctions that might create flow or emotional continuity:

“A catgrin on its face
and a live, ready to eat pilgrim
held between its teeth” (Kolatkhar, The Priest, 31-33).

The absence of syntactic complexity reflects the mechanical, routine nature of religious practice, reinforcing the poem's ironic tone.

Tone and Irony:

The tone of the poem revolves around irony. Instead of criticizing *The Priest* directly, Kolatkhar uses juxtaposition to create irony. *The Priest's* dependence and physical weakness stand in stark contrast to his role as a spiritual mentor. This irony conveys sympathy rather than animosity and is mild rather than forceful. The poet challenges the institutions that bestow authority on religious leaders while acknowledging their human limitations. Thus, the tone strikes a balance between compassion and skepticism.

The tone of *The Priest* is crafted with a gentle irony that emerges from the contrasts rather than outright criticism. Kolatkhar portrays *The Priest* as a spiritual leader, but he also emphasizes *The Priest's* physical frailty and dependence, creating a striking irony between the expected role and the actual reality. For example:

“on an old man's nose” (Kolatkhar, The Bus 11).

This plain statement immediately undercuts expectations of spiritual authority. Instead of wisdom or power, age and decline become the defining features of the religious figure. Irony is further developed through images of physical incapacity:

“thrown against the wall,
without an arm, a leg
or even a single head” (Kolatkhar, Yashwant Rao, 36-38).

The hands that are meant to carry out sacred rituals appear shaky and uncertain. It's quite ironic when you think about it—*The Priest*, who is supposed to embody confidence in his ceremonial role, struggles to maintain control over his own body. The poem also emphasizes dependence rather than authority:



“and is leaning against
any old doorway to sober up
like the local drunk” (Kolatkarak, The Door, 16-18).

This image carries a quiet irony. A figure who is supposed to guide others on a spiritual path finds himself in need of physical support. The irony here is both subtle and compassionate, highlighting our human vulnerability instead of pointing out moral shortcomings. Another ironic contrast appears in the reference to neglected ritual discipline:

“The bit of betel nut
turning over and over on his tongue” (Kolatkarak, The Priest, 16-17).

Instead of representing a sense of ritual purity, *The Priest* seems to be either careless or worn out, hinting that the religious practices have turned into tedious routines rather than genuine acts of devotion.

By using these subtle contrasts, Kolatkarak cleverly avoids falling into direct satire or harsh criticism. His tone is soft and compassionate, acknowledging *The Priest*’s human frailties while subtly questioning the power that his role carries. This careful balance of kindness and skepticism is what gives the poem its secular perspective and highlights Kolatkarak’s modernist irony.

Sacred Space versus Secular Vision:

The conflict between secular vision and sacred space that permeates *Jejuri* is best illustrated by *The Priest*. The speaker's viewpoint is secular, based on observation and skepticism, despite the setting being unquestionably religious. Sacred space is not rejected, but its metaphysical certainty is taken away.

According to the poem, sacred sites today are more about cultural heritage than they are about steadfast faith. *The Priest*, stuck between the old ways and fading relevance, symbolizes this transition. Kolatkarak's measured language and sharp wit reinforce this thematic shift beautifully. Though “*The Priest*” is set in a clearly sacred space—a temple and its ritual area—the speaker’s outlook is firmly secular, based on observation instead of faith. Kolatkarak doesn’t talk about divine presence or spiritual transcendence; he focuses on what is visibly there.

“on an old man’s nose” (Kolatkarak, The Bus, 11).

Instead of highlighting the holiness of the place or the sanctity of *The Priest*, the poet turns his attention to themes of age and decay. This shift draws our focus away from sacred interpretations and into the realm of tangible reality, hinting at a more secular perspective. *The Priest*’s role as a custodian of sacred space is further undermined by images of physical dependence:

“and is leaning against
any old doorway to sober up
like the local drunk” (Kolatkarak, The Door, 16-18).

The doorframe, as a component of the temple's design, is supposed to embody stability and sacred authority. Curiously, it’s *The Priest* who actually depends on it for support. This inversion alters the conventional connection between sacred spaces and spiritual strength, hinting at a more secular understanding. The erosion of ritual certainty is also evident in references to neglected religious discipline:



“The bit of betel nut
turning over and over on his tongue” (Kolatkarak, The Priest, 16-17).

Friday, which is often seen as a day of ritual significance, has been stripped down to just another ordinary day. The sacred calendar seems to lose its spiritual weight, hinting that religious practices are more about routine than genuine acts of faith.

The poem highlights how sacred spaces hold cultural importance but has lost their spiritual vitality. *The Priest*, who is meant to represent enduring tradition, comes across as weak and out of touch a person stuck between the weight of religious heritage and the doubts of the modern world. His physical deterioration reflects the overall state of sacred places in *Jejuri*, which now seem more like historical artifacts than places of unwavering faith.

Significance of the Poem in *Jejuri*:

In the context of *Jejuri*, *The Priest* plays an essential role in articulating Kolatkarak’s critique of God and organized religion, emphasizing everyday experiences over philosophical reasoning. Rather than directly questioning the divine, the poem highlights the human figure of religion—*The Priest*—whose physical decline underscores the fragility of religious authority.

“on an old man’s nose” (Kolatkarak, The Bus, 11).

This clear observation points out that divine institutions are upheld by vulnerable, human individuals, quietly raising doubts about the stability and power we typically associate with God and religion. The poem also connects thematically with other poems in the sequence such as *The Bus* and *The Doorstep*, which similarly reveal the ordinariness behind sacred journeys. In *The Bus*, the pilgrimage begins not with spiritual elevation but with an uncomfortable, mundane bus ride, reducing the sacred journey to a physical inconvenience. Likewise, in *The Doorstep*, sacred space is approached hesitantly and without reverence, emphasizing doubt rather than devotion. *The Priest* complements these poems by showing that even within the temple; faith is mediated through human weakness. Stylistically, *The Priest* exemplifies Kolatkarak’s modernist minimalism and visual precision. Lines such as:

“and is leaning against
any old doorway to sober up
like the local drunk” (Kolatkarak, The Door, 16-18).

In his work, Kolatkarak masterfully employs sharp visual details instead of getting lost in abstract religious discussions. These images pull our attention to the physical world, reinforcing the secular outlook that permeates *Jejuri*.

By honing in on a single character instead of a deity or a ritual, the poem allows for a deep dive into the human aspect of faith. *The Priest* emerges as a representation of religion itself—aging, fragile, and increasingly out of place in a modern, skeptical society. This focused character exploration makes *The Priest* one of the most insightful poems in the entire sequence.

So, *The Priest* stands out not just for its critical take on organized religion but also for its clear and concise style. It really captures *Jejuri*’s broader themes—like skepticism, the everyday, and the fading of sacred beliefs—making it crucial for fully grasping Kolatkarak’s poetic vision.

Conclusion:

A stylistic analysis of *The Priest* reveals how Arun Kolatkarak crafts a non-religious perspective within a sacred temple through his deliberate choice of language. He employs simple words, vivid imagery,



straightforward syntax, and a touch of soft irony as his primary tools. These elements work together to strip away the reverence typically associated with religious authority, while still acknowledging its cultural significance. The poem embodies the modernist urge to question traditional beliefs while remaining sensitive to the human experience. In *Jejuri*, the shift from a religious to a secular understanding of the sacred is what endures, making *The Priest* a lasting reflection of the human mind's imprint on God and the evolving nature of spirituality in contemporary India.

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Article Received: 15/12/2025

Article Accepted: 23/12/2025

Published Online: 26/12/2025

To Cite the Article: *Bade, Amol and Dhakane, Rohidas*. "Sacred Space and Secular Vision: A Stylistic Reading of *The Priest* from *Jejuri*." *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VI, Issue-3, December, 2025, 198-204. www.literarycognizance.com

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