Sacred without God: *Bhakti* in the Poetry of Arun Kolatkar

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Abstract
Of all literary traditions that have silhouetted the contours of modern Indian Poetry, the tradition of *Bhakti* poetry stands out pre-eminently from the rest; it provides a creative template out of which modern Indian English Poetry stems forth. In fact, the subversive poetics of the saint poets that characterises Bhakti poetry becomes a ready tool in the hands of many anti-establishment movements of contemporary Indian literature to critique the established hegemonic structures of the society that prevent a free play of creativity. It is in this context that we can locate the significance of Arun Kolatkar's poetry. An extensive reading of contemporary Indian English Poetry reveals that no Indian English poet has internalised the sensibility of Bhakti tradition to the extent that Arun Kolatkar has in his works; such internalisation makes his poetry the most fascinating site to look for the contemporary manifestations of Bhakti. Hence, this paper attempts to explore the influence of Bhakti poetry on Arun Kolatkar, arguably the greatest Indian English poet, and seeks to delineate the way the spirit of Bhakti creeps into his poems while detailing the material world. Although Kolatkar is least interested in using poetry as a means to express the intense longing for a personal deity as the Bhakti poets did, his passionate devotion towards life matches the devotion of saints in its intensity. The paper, thus, attempts to bring out the quality of devotion that has an existence in Kolatkar's poetry without any concrete references to God and religion.

Keywords
Arun Kolatkar, *Bhakti*, sacred, God, Indian English, poetry

Modern Indian English poetry is marked by a passionate engagement with different Indian literary traditions. Of all the literary traditions that have shaped the sensibility of modern Indian English Poetry, Bhakti tradition stands pre-eminently for the way it shares the post-modern scepticism towards all forms of establishments and the refreshing perspective that it offers on the issues and

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dilemmas of our times. The subversive poetics of the saint poets that characterises Bhakti poetry becomes a ready tool in the hands of many anti-establishment movements of contemporary Indian literature to critique the established and the hegemonic structures and canons that prevent a free play of creativity. In this context, it would be fascinating to explore the manifestations of Bhakti in modern Indian English Poetry since it gives us an opportunity to explore how a tradition remains contemporary and a contiguous creative stream across the passage of time. This article ventures into such an endeavour by attempting to bring out the traces of Bhakti tradition in the poetry of Arun Kolatkar.

Bhakti movements that originated in various parts of India, between the sixth and seventeenth centuries, were essentially spiritual revolts against the institutionalised religion and the political power structures that had imprisoned God within the shackles of religion and temple. Bhakti tradition began with the sixth century movements of *Alvars* and *Nayanars* in Tamil Nadu. Through their devotional outpouring towards Vishnu and Shiva, these saint poets of the medieval Tamilnadu revived the spirit of Bhakti among the common people. These movements seem to have later triggered the *Vachana* movement of the *Virashaivas* in twelfth century Karnataka. Except Basava, other major saint poets such as Dasimaiah, Allama, Siddarama and Akka belonged to the lower strata of society. Under the stewardship of Basava who called himself the least among the lower sections of society (though he was a Brahmin by birth), the Vachana movement turned into a socio-political movement for establishing a classless and a casteless society. Thus, beginning in South India, Bhakti Movement spread to other parts of India between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries with the coming of saint-poets such as Kabir, Meera Surdas, and Tulsidas in the north; Chaithanya, Vidyapati, and Chandidas in the East; and Eknath, Jnandev, Namdev, Tukaram, Janabai and Chokhamela in the west. The most striking and interesting fact about many of these saints is that they belonged to lower castes. Apart from expressing their longing for God, Bhakti also became a route to salvation for them to escape from the social ostracism they were subjected to. The irreverence towards caste hierarchy that is invariably found in the poems of these saint-poets could also be seen retrospectively as a poetic channelisation of the social unrest that had gained momentum among the downtrodden classes of those times.

Even a cursory reading of the Bhakti literature in the Indian regional languages can bring out two thematic patterns that the poets of different languages and time share: (1) the celebration of, and an intense longing for the experience of the divine and (2) an audacious, defiant and iconoclastic attitude towards the social institutions that segregated people, often with the support of religious orthodoxy. It is very interesting to note here that these two aspects of the Bhakti sensibility are tightly and organically linked. The undifferentiated

experience of the divine that the saints valued more than anything else, gave them the conviction about the interrelatedness and sacredness of life in various forms. When they realised that divisions that we attribute upon life are just creations of our deluded minds, they found the social stratifications based on caste and creed quite futile. The path they took towards the realisation of an enhanced consciousness also had ramifications in the socio-political world outside. To make this experience of all pervasive divinity a continuous one, they had only one hurdle before them – that is the ego, the sense of I. Mystics of all ages have professed that to come to such a state of mind one has to let go of one's ego. They believed that the best way to reach this state of consciousness is to consciously decline the privileges accorded in the hierarchic society and take a daring leap into the unknown. The conscious rejection of the privileges associated with one's caste, class and gender was for the saints a step towards making them more available to experience divinity. The subaltern sentiment that we can discern in their poems is an outcome of this attitude. Subalternity is a conscious choice for these poets as it helps them purify themselves for the sublimity of divine experiences. The conscious subalternity that the saints adopted, far from establishing the status quo, was a defiance towards all sorts of mental slavery. The subaltern subject position that the hegemonic power structures assign to an individual is not just a denial of the material comforts of life but a humiliated state of existence that denies them even the basic human dignity. The saints opened up a new dimension for human dignity. The daring spirit of violating the social norms that we find in most of the Bhakti poets is rooted in the trust in one's own inner world and the belief that nothing external is worthy enough to be given more importance and respect than the riches of the inner being. As A.K. Ramanujan says in this context, "For to them (*the saints*) equality is equalizing downwards on the social scale, a downward mobility, almost seeking of dishonor as among the Cynics of Greece and the Pasupatas of India, debasing themselves so that they may be cleansed of pride" (*Collected Essays* 285) The subalternity that they consciously seek is not one without dignity, but an ultimate assertion of their identity and an active search for divinity.

The assertion of the subaltern life that we find in Bhakti poetry is not part of a political propaganda, but a step towards the liberation of subaltern consciousness from the hegemony of religion and caste. However, in this process, the political power structures get unsettled, because all types of tyranny are built on the colonisation of people's minds, and when this base gets shaky, the realignment of the structures built on it becomes inevitable. Their devotion also resulted in political liberation even though that was not the prime motive of the exponents of the Bhakti movements. The poems of these saints show a wonderful mix of the spirit of rebellion and the surrender of devotion. It can be argued here that the way they integrated these two antithetical modes and

brought it into their poetic expressions resulted in the creation of a secular literary legacy that survives even today in the best voices of Indian English poetry. The fact that the voices of these poets can still be discerned in the writings of the contemporary Indian writers, especially in Kolatkar, stands testimony to their lasting influence. Such a dense fascination of a postmodern poet such as Kolatkar for the verses of the saints is at the same time intriguing and exciting given the fact that the poet shows blatant scepticism when he talks about matters regarding faith, and at the same time employs his poetry to celebrate the intense experiences of the here and now that border on the notion of divine through the subaltern. Kolatkar assimilates the vibrant and the audacious sensibility of the Bhakti poets which merges subalternity and devotion together and develops a poetics which fits both.

Arun Kolatkar (1931-2004) was a bilingual poet who wrote both in Marathi and English. *Jejuri*, his first poetry collection in English, came out in 1974 in *Opinion Literary Quarterly* and later published as a book in 1976 by the Clearing House Publication. Although the book went on to win the prestigious Commonwealth Poetry Prize, Kolatkar did not bother to publish another poetry collection till 2004. However, he did not stop writing during this period; though he was writing continuously over the years, he chose to maintain a healthy distance from all the noise and glamour that the publishing world had turned into. So, instead of big publishers, he preferred to publish his poems in literary magazines of limited readership, mostly run by his friends and associates. This is indicative of the rebellious spirit that Kolatkar always upheld as a writer. The established narratives get exposed and subverted in literature when the writer is a true rebel, himself. Kolatkar's poetic sensibility is indeed underpinned by the spirit of rebellion. He went against all the ideological constructs which provided fodder for the quotidian narratives; focused instead on the commonplace realities, made unusual, shocking and haunting connections while portraying them; and by doing that, created a poetic world that stood firmly against the dominant ideologies. He was part of a bohemian subculture of artists and poets in Bombay. This group provided a space for him away from the cacophony of the city noises of Bombay. In early 2004, thirty years after the publication of *Jejuri*, two collections came out – *Kala Ghoda Poems* and *Sarpa Satra*; but by then, Kolatkar was almost dying from cancer which eventually claimed his life in late 2004. Another collection came out posthumously in 2008, *The Boatride and Other Poems*, which contains his previously uncollected English poems, translations of his Marathi poems and the translations of Marathi Bhakti poems. Four Marathi collections also came out between 2003 and 2006 – *Chirimiri*, *Bhijki Vahi, Droan*, *Arun Kolatkarchya Char Kavita*. Finally, thanks to the great efforts of Aravind K Mehrotra and the Bloodaxe publishing house, his complete collection of poems in English saw the light of the day in 2010.

Sant Kavya (Saint Poetry) has a unique place in Marathi literature. It was in the able hands of Bhakti poets such as Jnaneswar, Eknath and Tukaram who were part of the *Varkari* tradition that Marathi poetry attained an identity of its own. There is no wonder that Kolatkar, who was always eager to reclaim everything that was part of his tradition, became interested in the poems of these great poets of his native tongue. His enduring English translations of Marathi Bhakti poets such as Tukaram, Eknath, Janabai and Muktabai stand testimony to his sensitive relation with this rich literary legacy. He could very well identify with the belligerent verses of the saint-poets without going into the theology associated with them because at the very core, his poetry originates from a passionate engagement with life which contains all the intensity and devotion of the saints towards their personal god. For Kolatkar, it was absolutely necessary to have a close affinity with the poets that he translated in terms of sensibility. He considered that it is necessary to "possess" a poem in order to translate it: "I can't translate a poem until I've got the feeling that I possess it" (*Collected Poems* 345; all poems of Kolatkar discussed in this article are from this collection); he was so much drawn towards Tukaram and his poetry that at one stage he wrote: "I'll create such confusion/ that nobody can be sure about what you (*Tukaram*) wrote and what I did" (353). But fortunately, Kolatkar keeps his identity as a poet intact despite his respect and admiration for these poets. Though devotion never becomes a major poetic preoccupation in Kolatkar, his poetry nevertheless conveys a different and a nuanced sense of the divine.

Kolatkar's poetry is in fact a celebration of the mystery that shrouds life. His poems capture the depth of this mystery by peeling out the institutionalised narratives of socio-cultural life that attempt to domesticate all the excess of life. He approaches the life blooming around him with the audacity of a rebel and the wonder of a child. The mystery of life that his poetry evokes is close in its spirit to the eternal mystery of God that the saints attempt to communicate in their verses. The saints not only realised that the mysterious dimension of life that opened before them is far beyond their comprehension, but also the fact that it will always remain so. Life when experienced in its inner essence becomes a mystery that can never be unravelled. But one can immerse in that mystery and make it a part of one's being. Devotion is such a state of mind wherein this mystery is embraced passionately. In fact, the Tamil Bhakti movement of the sixth century, *Alvar*, the first among Bhakti movements, embodied this spirit in its very name; "alvar" in Tamil means "to get immersed"; an alvar in that sense is the one who is immersed in her god.

However, in the postmodern world in which Arun Kolatkar lived and wrote, "to get immersed" with the personal deity was not just an aberration but also a politically anachronistic virtue. It is the world that witnessed the worst forms of violence in the name of God and religion. Hence, the times demand a

quality of immersion in issues more sacred than God and more spiritual than religion. This is one of the major reasons why Kolatkar chooses to invest his notion of spirituality in all intense engagements with life rather than religion. As Kolatkar's poetry proves, spirituality could be attained while passionately engaging with the material world with all its imperfections and transience. Without saying anything about the spiritual dimension of life, the poet is able to give a glimpse of the sacred by detailing the material world so minutely, bringing out the mystery that is at the heart of each and every speck of life. Poetry becomes an act of revolt against the quotidian perceptions of life and at the same time it is an intense act of attention to the here and now. However, the direct and simple approach towards life that we find in Kolatkar's poetry has much in common with the saint poets who did away with all the proprieties of poetic language and addressed their Gods in the most informal tone. Bruce King rightly points out the striking similarity between the Bhakti poets who were lost in ecstasies of the divine and a post-modern urban poet such as Kolatkar:

> In Kolatkar's hands the tradition of saints' poetry take the form, in our age of self conscious disbelief, of an ironic parody of a pilgrimage which while mocking institutionalized religion affirms the free imagination and dynamism of life…. We might see the emotional withdrawal, skepticism, and humour as a kind of modern equivalent of the medieval Bhakti saint who could ignore rituals and address his God directly, conversationally, even skeptically. (165)

A deep sense of reverence and an emotional longing to be in communion with God are the factors that define devotion. By default, it is a theocentric experience. What the saints who were part of Bhakti cult did was to liberate this emotion out of the established power structures of religion and show that it is a state of mind that anyone can get tuned to despite one's religious leaning and social standing. The radical potential of this redefinition of devotion lies in the emphasis that they put on the subjective dimension of devotion which does not need any approval from an outside authority; what really matters is the intensity of the longing that the devotee has towards her/his God. As A.K. Ramanujan says, this relationship with the God is also an act of defiance of the man-made social structures and rules: "… love of god is not only an unconditional giving up of all you have, but is necessarily an illegitimate relationship, illegitimate from the point of view of law and social order; it is an act of violation against ordinary expected loyalties, a breakdown of predictable and secure" (*Collected Essays* 327). Taking on from the saints whom he admired a lot, Kolatkar's poetry opens up another possibility – devotion even without God as the addressee. Like the Bhakti poet, Kolatkar defies the structured way of thinking

that society imposes but differs from the saints in his object of devotion. In his poems, the devotion is not towards a God but the very ordinary things among God's creations. But it has all the depth of the devotion that the Bhakti poets had towards their God. Although divinity is not conspicuously visible in his poetry, its presence is felt in each line because of the minute and sympathetic detailing of the everyday reality. In a sense, it is an inversion of Bhakti. The intense devotion of the Bhakti poets made them see God in everything they came across; but in Kolatkar's poetry divinity surfaces as a result of devotion, not the other way around. When the saints consciously adopted subalternity as a means to cleanse their mind of ego and thus be open to the divine, Kolatkar's openness and sensitivity to the subaltern life, invokes the sacred in his poetry. Thus even in a pilgrimage site such as Jejuri, divinity gets manifested in the form of animals, beggars and ruined temples, not in the form of idols, religious myths and beliefs. What makes them holy is the sensitive perception that the poet exhibits when he talks about them. He creates a "poetic" sacred which exists in the here and now, accessible to the senses. Instead of speaking about the mysterious dimension of life directly, he makes an enactment of it through poetry. The depictions of life in *Jejuri* are realistic to the core; the poet keeps his language very close to reality. But while doing it, he offers a glimpse of the unfathomable mystery of life which exceeds language. Unlike mystic poets it's not an attempt to express one's spiritual longings and experiences, but a celebration of the here and now. Kolatkar makes poetry itself an act of devotion; but his objects of devotion are the ordinary people, animals and even inanimate objects. Through this intense attention on the "trivia," he creates a poetic space for the true spirit of religion, seeing God in all forms of life, without falling into mysticism and the other worldly conceptions that are usually associated with the spiritual.

Kolatkar's detached tone in *Jejuri* has been a subject of much misinterpretation. It has been stated as an indication of the poet's disjunction from the Indian ethos and a sense of alienation from his surroundings. Most of the initial critical responses to *Jejuri* echo this observation. Balchandra Nemade says that "Kolatkar comes and goes like a week-end tourist from Bombay" (*Jejuri*: *Critical Perspectives* 94) without being touched by the place and the people there. According to S.K. Desai, *Jejuri* is a "minor" classic because in spite of its stylistic merits, it does not deal with "moral" issues (*Jejuri*: *Critical Perspectives* 59). For Ravindra Kimbahune the very fact that *Jejuri* is in a "foreign" language makes it an artistic failure: "The use of foreign language to express native sensibility also initiates the unavoidable process of evaluation in terms of a foreign culture. A native journey, therefore, in a foreign idiom degenerates into a tour" (*Jejuri*: *Critical Perspectives* 74). Shubhangi Raykar says that the ruins that we find in *Jejuri* exist in the mind of the poet, not in the spiritual tradition: "The ruinous state of a temple does not indicate the ruin of a tradition to a Hindu

mind; one has to conclude that ruin is probably within the mind of the poet" (*Jejuri*: *Critical Perspectives* 105). These critics overlook the fact that the world that Kolatkar portrays is detailed minutely. This overwhelming detailing of ordinary life indicates the poet's active involvement in it rather than an outsider's scornful attitude. These common place realties become his central preoccupations because of the enormous sympathy that he feels towards all forms of life. They don't realise that a sensitive artist can find the divine in the mundane; an attunement with a tradition is not necessary for that. As A.K. Mehrotra points out in his introduction to Kolatkar's *Collected Poems in English*, but for the affection Kolatkar feels towards his poetic objects they would not have got so much attention. The poetic persona in his poems is detached from the charades of the different establishments but not from the abundance of life that is happening in spite of them:

> The matter of fact tone, bemused, seemingly offhand, is easy to get wrong, and Kolatkar's Marathi critics got it badly wrong, finding it to be cold, flippant, at best skeptical. They were forgetting of course, that the clarity of Kolatkar's observations would not be possible without abundant sympathy for the person or animal (or even inanimate object being observed); forgetting too that without abundant sympathy for what was being observed, the poems would not be acts of attention they are. (14)

Commenting on *Jejuri*, Jeet Thayil too makes a similar observation: "… whatever the poet's eye alights on – particularly the odd, the misshapen, and the famished – receives the gift of close attention, which is a kind of love" (*Sixty Indian Poets* 393).

The argument that since *Jejuri* is in an alien language such as English and hence the poet is unable to bring out the true essence of the place is fundamentally a flawed argument at the core. In fact, Kolatkar's use of language has a major role in creating the "sacred" in *Jejuri*. He creates a transparent poetic world where the reader gets the feeling that s/he is present in the place. This transparency is achieved by making the language a replica of the sights. Only a writer with great sensibility can achieve this. When the details of the ordinary life are presented so vividly, it gives the feel of an otherworldly reality because of the attention that is bestowed on them. Language itself becomes an enactment of the life that is being depicted. More than a tool to represent life, language becomes a medium to indicate the mysterious quality of life that exceeds all representations. For instance, in the poem, "The Butterfly," the movement of the butterfly becomes too vibrant to fit into poetry: "It opens before it closes/ and closes before it o/ where is it" (53). The wonder evoked by depicting the movements of a butterfly becomes an excess that is outside the temporality of our perception and thus it defies the limits of language: "It has

no future/It is pinned down to no past/It's a pun on the present" (52). The butterfly itself becomes a signifier for the vibrancy of nature which cannot be contained in language. It stands for the bewitching theatre of nature which can never become redundant, unlike the temples of Jejuri.

In *Jejuri*, Kolatkar critiques the immaturity of the religious mind and instead praises an open mind that considers beauty and wonder as qualities to create the sacred. Despite the redundant religious preaching which makes the priest's son repeat the legend of Khandoba mechanically, he gets wonder-stuck at the sight of a butterfly. The wonder that comes naturally to a child is the original source of both religion and art. Hence the artist and the saint pursue this wonder according to their intuitive understanding. Their paths may be different and so may be their convictions, but there are some points of convergence where great art can give glimpses of true religion. In Kolatkar's poetry, the divine is not deliberately sought, but the intensity in the depiction of life unfolding around the poet creates a poetic space for such a quality to flourish.

If *Jejuri*, although quite unusually, deals with matters regarding faith and religion by virtue of being set in a pilgrimage site, in *Kala Ghoda Poems*, religion is not at all the concern of the poet; its sole focus is the life of the marginalised found on the fringes of Bombay. Despite the absence of religious motifs, the element of devotion can be discerned in the poetic vision that is implicit in the detailing of the subaltern life in this collection. Since life itself is the only God the poet worships, his devotion does not need the ambience of a temple to be awakened. The poet can awaken his sense of devotion while sitting in the Wayside Inn in Kala Ghoda and watching a crow approach a twig. The description of the movements of the crow in the poem, "To a Crow," reminds one of devotional poetry of Shankara of Advaita Philosophy which describes the deity in all its physical details. The movements of the crow are captured by the poet breathtakingly, leaving the reader to wonder whether the poetic object is a sacred figure. The poet closely follows the movements of the crow and depicts them with intense, dramatic effects:

> And there you are.
> Now!
> Stand on it.
>
> A twig! A twig! A twig! A twig! A twig!
> You got it! You got it! You got it!
> It's all yours, now. (92)

To relish in moments like these is all that the poet cares about, but the way he does it makes these momentary realities attain an ethereal quality. By doing this, he gives a Zen like feel of otherworldliness while being deeply rooted in the

here and now. In a way, it is a turn away from the anthropocentric conception of the world. The poet decentres the poetic "self" by getting identified with other forms of life. Erasing the self by embracing the simplicity of natural life is part and parcel of the Zen and Taoist way of life. The thrust here is not to posit a transcendental "soul" which is above the material reality but to become part of the "ordinariness" of life, effortlessly, as it is. Only a consciousness which can conceive human beings and other living beings in the same plane can attune itself to this "ordinariness." It is in sharp contrast to the dichotomy of man and nature that underpins the Western Enlightenment logic. By getting under the skin of a crow, a rat, or a dog, the poet locates himself in the depth of natural life, leaving the human world of prejudices and redundant perceptions aside. In the poem, "Pi-Dog," the poet's mind wanders into the world of a dog in the traffic island in Kala Ghoda. The city that will soon be preoccupied by the frenzy of the traffic of vehicles and people is completely deserted in the early hour of dawn: "the hour when the dog can call the city his own" (75), leaving him alone to indulge in his musings. The human world of desires and urge to make a living is absent in this tranquil moment. The dog knows the Gayathri mantra, but not its meaning. But his prayer means exactly what is said in Gayathri mantra. Kolatkar's playfulness touches the threshold of divinity in poetic moments like these. The prayer of a dog is naturally the same as the meaning of Gayathri because prayer is imprinted in the genes of all forms of life. Playfulness is what stands out in this poem like in most of the other poems of Kolatkar. The city reconstructs itself as the dog continues with his play: "As I play/ the city slowly reconstructs itself" (80). The playful celebration of the simplicity of natural life is a recurring strand in Kolatkar, and it invariably evokes the feel of a deeper reality behind the superficial endeavours of human beings.

The thrust Kolatkar gives to the natural life is all the more evident in poems such as "Meera" and "Song of Rubbish." Although Kolatkar does not seek the reality that is beyond the ever changing world around him and celebrates the transient world itself, he has the potential to feel the presence of an enticing mystery dormant in the so-called trivial events. Thus, for him, the municipal sweeper dancing on the garbage in the truck is like the medieval saint-poet, Meera in a state of divine ecstasy: "like a Meera before her lord/ a Meera/ with a broomstick for a lute" (87). And the garbage she piles up before loading it to the truck is an art exhibition, although it is appreciated only by "a few discerning crows and a kitten" (85). The poetic objects cannot be more ordinary than this, but when they are approached with reverence and curiosity, they glow with mystery and beauty. The municipal cleaner is the poet's Meera because the way she cleans the road appears to him like the dance of Meera in a spiritual trance.

For Kolatkar's Meera the object of worship is not a personal deity, but the waste that the city leaves behind. In front of the Jahangir art gallery, when "most of the art critics are sleeping off the effects of last night's free drink" (84), this exhibition of leftovers comprising dry leaves, scraps of paper, prawn shells, onion skins, potato peels, castoff condoms, dead flowers – mostly gulmohar and copper-pod – is open for just half an hour, signifying the impermanence of art. They can as well be called "Homage to Bombay" because the city is basically filled with garbage, a fact that its glitz and glamour could not cover up:

> The installations might as well have been
> titled 'Homage to Bombay, one,'
> 'Homage to Bombay, two and so on,'
>
> since a good bit of the city stands
> on sweepings such as these.
> All of Colaba, for example, or Khetwadi. (85)

To these leftovers of a big city, the inevitable flip side of prosperity and glamour, Meera pays her obeisance after lovingly putting them together:

> shifting her weight
> from one foot to the other,
> she turns around herself
>
> by slow degrees,
> giving her toes
> enough time
>
> to genuflect and offer
> obeisance
> to all cardinal points,
>
> to each of
> the thirty-two compass points,
> in turn. (87)

A municipal cleaner's scavenging job is intimately and seriously described as an elaborate religious act of devotion. For the poet, cleaning the rubbish that piles up in a city is no less sacred than performing *puja* to deities in temples. The natural life as it unfolds before his eyes has all the luminosity that is normally associated with the spiritual. By stripping life to its basics, the poet dares to look beyond the power structures which limit reality. In the poem, "Song of Rubbish," the poet can hear the birth pangs of the city in the landfill site where

garbage is dumped. Kolatkar's greatness lies in his ability to see this link between the trivial and the monumental. And it stems from an understanding about life that tells him that it is the trivial that makes the monumental possible and both are governed by the transience of life that can at any time decompose the precarious structures of the monumental into the basic trivial.

As in Bhakti Poetry, movement is a great virtue in Kolatkar's poetry. Life moves on, nothing stays forever in the same position. This movement can nullify the stagnant structures and the established canons. As Basava – the twelfth century saint poet – declared "Things standing shall fall; but the Moving ever shall stay" (*Oxford India Ramanujan* 1). The transience of life can make an immature mind insecure and look for certainty in dogmas and fanatic beliefs. Kolatkar's poetry, on the other hand, celebrates the transience of life and the uncertainty associated with it. He almost has a Dionysian delight in the destruction of human establishments by nature with the passage of time like the "departing" year in the poem, "Man of the Year." Standing at the street corner, "leaning on the shoulder of a bright red pillar-box at a drunken angle" with a "foolish grin on his face" (178), the Year has already forgotten whom Time magazine picked up as the Man of the Year. "His" memories fade like the checkerboard pattern which some old men drew on the back of the twenty foot tortoise in Jejuri that gets "fainter all the time as the children run." In the poem, "The Wind Song," the mad wind that blows does not spare anything. All the certainties that human beings try to create through institutions get decimated in the frenzy of the wind. Not only wealth, fame, artistic and academic achievements but also the certainties that we take for granted and deliver to the future generations through education are made just a chimera in the process. Mr. Kulkarni's certificates are lying "shattered" on the floor; the professor's poem "slipped out his hand and disappeared, just like that" (243); the painter has to run for his life because the "the long legged foxy lady he painted on the billboard has begun shaking her hips"(243) and can come after him at any time; the map of India is "kicking" and "dancing" on the classroom wall and eventually goes out of the classroom: "There it goes, it's gone already./Cities, mountains, forests, rivers and all,/ gone,/ out of the window and up into the sky" (243).

In this transience of life, not just the certainties regarding the world, but also those regarding one's identity, lose currency. Solipsistic brooding over one's identity which can be found in most of the modern Indian English poets is absolutely absent in Kolatkar. He is often reluctant to speak about himself in his poems; and occasionally, whenever he speaks, like an accomplished magician, he performs a vanishing trick, making the poem more of an escape from oneself rather than an expression of oneself:

My name is Arun Kolatkar
I had a little matchbox

I lost it
then I found it
I kept it
in my right hand pocket

It is still there (229)

After introducing himself, all he has got to say is about a match-box. As he himself said in another context, this is a "disappearing trick." Anjali Nerlekar's comment is relevant in this context: "It is the repeated image of self-erasure, of a desire to merge into the masses and not stand apart that is at the heart of Kolatkar's works" (*No Singular Truths* 66-67). In Bhakti poetry, the self is depicted as a barrier to one's spiritual growth. In fact, the blows that the ego goes through are more than welcome. This is quite dramatically expressed in these lines of the Kannada saint-poet Mahadeviyakka:

Make me go from house to house
With arms stretched for alms.
If I beg make them give nothing.
If they give make it fall to the ground.
If it falls, before I pick it up, make a dog take it.
O lord
white as jasmine (*The Oxford India Ramanujan* 86)

The spirit of self-abnegation through sufferings is an underpinning in "The Turnaround." The poem begins with the line, "Bombay made me a beggar." "In a small village that had a waterfall, but no name" his "blanket found a buyer" (237) and in Rotegaon he went on trial. The journey takes on the colour of a pilgrimage because of the passive acceptance of the pain that comes the poetic persona's way. What is being eroded as the journey progresses is his sense of shame and at an epiphanic moment he decides to "turnaround." This renunciation of respectability and awareness about the contingent nature of one's social identity are the undercurrents of some other poems as well. The "Hospital poems," offer an ironic take on the toll that physical ailments have on one's identity: "the drop of saline that follows the drop of saline/ in the little tube of glass has become/ the centre of my universe" (246). His world becomes limited and cut apart from that of his mother and the nurse who are there in the room. His existence is reduced to bare physicality, taking away even the basic elements of human self-esteem. Most of the spiritual traditions say that the unwrapping of the different layers of self leads one to the divine. And for that reason the futile attempt to protect one's "self" while living in a brittle world is

ridiculed by many of the saint-poets. For Basavanna, it is like "making an iron frame for a bubble on the water" (42). The consciousness about the contingent nature of one's identity can create some sort of innocence, shedding away all the prejudices about oneself and the world. It's a quality that Kolatkar cherishes a lot. It is the alternative for the cunning and the mean world he portrays with sarcasm. The innocence of his vision brings his attention to the trivial details of ordinary lives; he has the eye of a child which is not yet blinded by prejudices and conditionings. That's why in *Sarpa Satra*, Astika, the child of Jaratkaru, becomes the apt person to stop "the festival of hatred" (211). If in *Jejuri*, the innocence of the boy at the sight of a butterfly constitutes the poet's aesthetic, in *Sarpa Satra* through Astika's innocence the poetic voice attains the moral. The name "Astika" means one who is devout and pure at heart. The insanity of a king who is power-drunk and the meanness of the sages who abet the extermination of the entire Naga species, find a perfect antidote in the innocence of Astika. When the wise and the powerful fail in ushering in peace and justice, it is the child's vision that remains the only hope. Only an uncorrupt mind can make a positive intervention in the vicious cycle of violence and revenge:

> You are too young
> – true.
> Still wet behind the ears,
>
> some may say.
> But that
> Actually may be your greatest strength.
>
> It means your eyesight
> is good,
> your vision clear.
> …
> It means the gangrene
> of insensitivity
> hasn't spread to your soul. (205-06)

Kolatkar's poems give room for a reading on spiritual lines because they playfully bring to our attention the essential human qualities that are associated with the spiritual. It is quite fascinating to note how a writer who is steeped in the material reality around him is able to evoke in his poetry the element of the sacred. The devotion of the Bhakti poets resurfaces in his poetry in a contemporary colour and tenor. The Bhakti of the saint-poets has already become part of the institutionalised religion and the saints themselves have been pigeonholed into hagiographies. The radical nature of their sensibility has

to be looked for not in the sphere of the religion but in the works of artists who can connect with the heart and soul of the saints. Kolatkar gives by far the most contemporary experience of Bhakti by locating it within the impoverished world of the dispossessed, the flip side of the glossy dream world of multi-national capital. Bhakti exudes in his poetry as a mix of love and beauty and yet mired in the bleak realities of the modern world. And this quality makes him, as Gowri Ramnarayan says, the "bhakti poet of our times" (*The Hindu Literary Review*).

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