

**LANGUAGE IN INDIA**  
**Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow**  
**Volume 10 : 1 January 2010**  
**ISSN 1930-2940**

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.  
Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.  
Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.  
B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.  
A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.  
Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.  
K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.  
Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

*Language and Literature: An Exposition -*  
Papers Presented in Karunya University International Seminar

**Editor:**  
**J. Sundarsingh, Ph.D.**

*Language in India* [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

**10 : 1 January 2010**

Sreena K.

Reading 'god' Backwards

## Reading 'god' Backwards

Sreena K.

---

### *Jejuri*

*Jejuri* is Kolatkar's famous sequence of poems which was published in 1976. The collection won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize the following year. It mainly comprises of thirty six short lyric utterances which are the observations of the narrator who arrives in the town, Jejuri. The poems describe the poet's visit to the town of Jejuri and the hill temple of Khandoba, a temple for Lord Shiva as the incarnation, also known as Malhari Markand.

### **A Secularized Visit to the Temple**

The visit is completed in a half revolution of the sun starting in the early morning and ending in the late evening. The entire experience is secularized and trivialized. The writer is starkly non-involved and frankly impervious to a sense of devotion. This visit lacks a spirit of worship which ordinarily and normally prompts thousands to visit Jejuri.

It is striking and intriguing to note that the experience is so familiar and yet so foreign to the protagonist who is an Indian.

Both devotion and commercialism populate the town, and the man we follow does not search for enlightenment; he is there for sight-seeing. His straightforward voice colours most of the poems through its realistic portrayal of the mind of the priest and the god in several places in the poems.

### **The Structure and Content of the Compilation**

The thirty-six sections of *Jejuri* consist of perceptions and attitudes of someone on a journey. Here it is apparently a skeptical tourist, like that of Philip Larkin's "Church Going," who arrives in the ancient place of pilgrimage. At the end, he is waiting with irritation for a train, so he can depart. Larkin's distant, skeptical, bicycle-dipped visitor 'surprises' in himself a 'teenager to be more serious' inside the church.

Kolatkar's peripatetic poems characterize the teenagers to be more curious.

### **Perception and Alienation**

The opening poem in *Jejuri*, "The Bus" establishes themes of perception and alienation:

*Language in India* [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

10 : 1 January 2010

Sreena K.

Reading 'god' Backwards

Yours own divided face in a pair of glasses  
on an old man's nose  
is all the countryside you get to see.

.....  
at the end of the bumpy side  
with yours own face on either side  
when you get off the bus  
you don't step inside the old man's head  
(quoted.in *Modren Indian Poetry in English*, 90).

We are made aware of the imperviousness at the very outset, in this poem through a juxtaposition of an old man and the protagonist, who is a fellow traveler in the bus journey. Most of the pilgrims choose the bus or train in order to reach the sacred place.

The traditional form of "dandi" (walking miles) is completely forgotten. This shows modern man's desire for physical comfort and it seems to engender an idle occupation of indulgence in minds material superficialities.

The detached pilgrimage prevents the protagonist from absorbing the traditional and the religious value of the place, similar to that of the tarpaulin flaps that prevents him from seeing the town. The phrases like "your own divided face" etc. signify a kind of horror and terror associated with journey. It may signify the terrorist attacks that occur sadly in some Indian situations, for example in Ayodhya, Gujarat, Mumbai and the churches of Orisa.

The old man in the poem may be the old, traditional beliefs our country, or this may be a reference to Jejuri itself. That is, the protagonist is unable to "step inside the old man's head".

### **Continuing Critical Scrunity**

The striking sense of emotional non-involvement is a persistent feature of *Jejuri* from beginning to the end. Once down the bus at Jejuri the camera eye of the protagonist begins to pick on-and also- to pick at-the worldly , sensuous experience , so much so that even the quick intake of offerings of the hundred priest is not caught sight of.

### **Money-minded Priests**

"The Priest", the second poem in the sequence, skeptically means a priest calculating what he will get from the tourists' offerings.

Purring softly in front of the priest.  
A cat grin on its face  
And a like, ready to eat pilgrim

*Language in India* [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

10 : 1 January 2010

Sreena K.

Reading 'god' Backwards

Held between its teeth (quoted in *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, 167).

### **Appearance and Reality**

The discrepancy between appearance and possible reality, between the commercialization of the ruined places of worship and what in the speaker's view is diverse, is shown in the next poem, "Heart of the Ruins", about a mongrel bitch and her puppies in a sacred temple: "No more place of worship this place/is nothing less than the house of god". The difficulty in knowing what has been seen and the way reality can be re-visualized, perceived, is shown by "the doorstep":

That's no doorstep.  
It's a pillar on its side.  
Yes.  
That's what it is (quoted in *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, 167).

### **Legend and Falsification**

The commercialization of Jejuri and the razor's edge between legend and falsification is suggested by "A Scratch":

There is no crop  
Other than god  
And god is harvested here  
Around the year (quoted in *Modern Indian English Poetry*, 168).

One context is supplied by an old woman, who wants fifty paisa to take the tourists to a shrine. To the person who attempts to get rid of her, she says: "what else can an old woman do/ or kills as wretched as these?"

The old woman must be a one-time 'murali,' a 'devadasi,' now old and therefore, without any commercial prospects. The old woman can also stand for the old values and belief systems from which we are alienated.

### **Graphic Descriptions**

Being a visual artist, Kolatkar's poems are very elegant with graphic descriptions. Here in this poem we find such beautiful frames.

And as you look on,  
The cracks that begin around her eyes  
Spread beyond her skin  
And the hills crack

*Language in India* [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

10 : 1 January 2010

Sreena K.

Reading 'god' Backwards

And the sky falls  
With a plate-glass-clothes  
Around the shelter proof crone.  
(quoted *An Anthology Commonwealth Poetry* 42).

The visual impact of these lines is very suggestive of the poet's keen observation and his ability to picture the surroundings very realistically.

The description of the woman and the landscape seem to merge. The cracks that begin round her eyes spread beyond her skin. The repeated use of crack may suggest the earthquakes and the calamities due to that. Similarly the phrase "the bullet holes" can also mean the constant war in the modern world. Is the poet becoming prophetic here? The old woman can also stand for the disrupted and aged traditions of our country.

### **The Modern and the Orthodox**

The tension between the modern and the orthodox outlook is very pithily revealed in "Chaitanya" poems. The second "Chaitanya" poem offers an ironic contrast between the decayed, commercialized for tourists temple complex and the astonishing, living faith of the saints and devotional poets:

He popped a stone  
In his mouth  
And spat out gods (qtd.in *An Anthology Commonwealth Poetry*,40)

The sensibility expressed in these poems concentrates more on stones and animals, rather than men and god.

What is god  
And what is stone  
The dividing line  
If it exists  
Is very thin at Jejuri (quoted in *Modern Indian Poetry in English*,  
168)

### **Pilgrims and Pilgrimage under Attack**

Kolatkar attacks the attitude of the pilgrims regarding their thirst for material benefits they are seeking out of this visit. In order to satisfy these trivial needs of the devotees, the religious institutions have sorted out various gods, each performing a specific functions to appease the worshippers. This looks absurd to sensible persons. The concept of god itself is questioned by Kolatkar.

God is the word  
And I know it backwards....

*Language in India* [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

10 : 1 January 2010

Sreena K.

Reading 'god' Backwards

And this is the only song  
I've always sung. (quoted in *Modern Indian Poetry in English*,  
168)

### **Impotent Gods, God-men**

In the poem "Yeswant Rao", Kolatkar criticizes god-men of our modern world. This fast and mechanical life people opt for such "second class" god in order to get some peace and relief. Indeed there is a wide variety of gods.

Prettier faced  
Or straighter laced  
Gods who rob you for your gold.  
gods who rob you four your soul.  
Gods who make you walk  
On a bed of burning coal....  
(quoted in. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*,93).

The reality is that these gods do "nothing spectacular". They are merely a kind of bone setters. They deal only with superficial things.

The only thing is,  
As he himself has no heads, hands and feet,  
He happens to understand you little better.  
Because he is man. Not God. (qtd.in. *Modern Indian Poetry in  
English*,94).

### **Ability to Astonish**

*Jejuri* juxtaposes the ability to astonish, to give life interest and value, with what is conventional and dead. The artist is like the saint in being unconventional, in seeing life differently, in having a direct or renewed appreciation of living. The glory that is represented in the legends of *Jejuri* has been lost among its ruins and commercialization.

A failure to perceive the miraculous, divine and surreal in the ordinary world is similar to a deadening incompetence found at the railway station. Just as the ruined temples and their commercialization represent a lack of spirit, a lack of vitality, so the railway station from which the tourist attempts to leave *Jejuri* is another kind of ritual of modern India. The station indicator and the clock do not work. No one knows when the next train is due. No one answers the question. The speaker vows to

Slaughter a goat before the clock  
Smash a coconut on the railway track  
Smear the indicator with the blood of a cock  
If only someone would tell you

*Language in India* [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

10 : 1 January 2010

Sreena K.

Reading 'god' Backwards

When the next train is due. (quoted in *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, 167)

### **A Poem about Modern Wasteland, an Ironic Parody following Saints' Poetry Tradition in India**

*Jejuri* is a poem about a modern wasteland's loss of faith than a poem which contrasts deadness of perception with the ability to see the divine in the natural vitality of life.

In Kolatkar's hands the tradition of saints' poetry takes the form of an ironic parody of a pilgrimage which while mocking institutionalized religion affirms the free imagination and the dynamism of life. Kolatkar's flat, colloquial, skeptical tone complements his focus on particulars.

Kolatkar's poem disturbs us to draw some parallel between the secular view of *Jejuri* and the traditional religious meaning of a pilgrimage. We might see the emotional withstand, skepticism and humor as a kind of modern equivalent of the medieval Bhakti saint who could ignore rituals and address his God directly, conversationally, even skeptically.

When asked whether he believed God Kolatkar said; "I leave the question alone. I don't think I have to take a position about God one way or the other" (quoted in *Indian Literary Review*, 6-10). His poems show reality as it is, both in its deadening normality and in the divine life with which nature is charged when perceived by a playful and imaginative vision.

---

---

### **References**

Ayyappa, Paniker, ed. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. Sahitya Academy: New Delhi, 1991.

King, Bruce. *Modern Indian Poetry in English: Revised Edition*. OUP: New Delhi, 2001.

Kolatkar, Arun. "An Interview." *The Indian Literary Review*. Vol.1 No.4.

Narasimhaiah, ed., *Anthology of Commonwealth Poetry*. Macmillan: Chennai, 2004

---

---

Sreena K.  
Department of English  
Amrita School of Engineering  
Ettimadai  
Coimbatore  
Tamilnadu, India  
[sreena2me@hotmail.com](mailto:sreena2me@hotmail.com)

*Language in India* [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

**10 : 1 January 2010**

Sreena K.  
Reading 'god' Backwards