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A PILGRIMAGE TO POETRY: READING *JEJURI* AS A CASE OF INTER-SYSTEMIC LITERARY RECEPTION

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Bhakti poets across medieval India tried to repair the fault lines created by institutionalized religion through interrogation and a re-imagination of the relationship with the divine. Arun Kolatkar, a bilingual postcolonial Indian poet and translator of medieval Marathi bhakti poetry, draws from that repertoire of signification for his poem sequence, *Jejuri*, written in English to respond to his time. He is the bridge between these two worlds, and periods in literary history, helping us reassess the paradigm from within which we can have a deeper understanding of diverse ways of engaging with the divine. As a poet, he consumes the animate and inanimate inhabitants of Jejuri, a pilgrimage temple town in Maharashtra, India, and in the lineage of his literary ancestors, through his poetry questions, rebukes, and re-imagines institutionalized religion and hierarchies. His deceptively simple poems as concise, carefully crafted, evocative images are the bricks that build the outer world of *Jejuri*, and in reading them the reader's imaginative inner world is challenged. Time is cyclical and fluid, in *Jejuri*, and yet in an encounter with truth time is suspended and the world of Jejuri cracks open. In possessing the eye of both sceptic and mystic, he calls the reader to think for them and engage with the shifting meanings of cultural instruments. Thus, his poetry invites the reader to confront binary oppositions and contradictory perspectives, and while inhabiting the philosophy *achintya-bheda-abheda* representative of one-ness and difference. Through a close reading of *Jejuri* in general and of the three "Chaitanya" poems, in particular, this paper offers an analysis of the poem sequence through a polysystem theory as a response to the fault lines created by institutionalized religion.

Keywords: Arun Kolatkar, *Jejuri*, devotional poetry, bhakti tradition, South Asian devotionalisms, postcolonial literature, Chaitanya, translation

Introduction

In a plural society like that of India, differences in language, belief, and culture are the norm, and the challenge posed to peaceful coexistence is an issue of daily relevance. Amartya Sen tells us that, "experiencing pluralism can be effortless and automatic, but practicing it and defending it against organized attack cannot but be a serious intellectual exercise" [Sen 1993, *37*]. In the backdrop of an increasingly polarised world, this paper will explore how a poet draws from devotional poetry a vocabulary for plurality as a social condition. Democratic expressions of poets in the bhakti tradition, the belief in equality before god and the divine in all, became current from the "premodern" or "middle" period in Indian literatures. Poets engaged with questions of faith, interrogating social practices of discrimination, condemning oppressive social institutions like caste that was, then as they are now, legitimated by religion. Further, bhakti is a living tradition where authorship is fluid and not tied to a singular authoritative author, where texts talk to each other, through repetition and recreation. This enables frontiers to fall away and thus the "lines are blurred between fluid and fixed forms, written and oral traditions, originals and variations, high culture and popular culture, past and present" [Zecchini 2014, *65*]. The past flows into the present, hierarchies are suspended and the ancestor becomes one's contemporary.

The text in focus is Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* (first published in 1974), a cycle of 31 poems[1], and a seminal work in modern Indian literature written in English. Kolatkar (1932–2004), born in Kolhapur in Maharashtra, was a bilingual poet, who wrote prolifically in both Marathi and English in post-Independence India. *Jejuri*, Kolatkar's first published collection in English, won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1977. He is also the author of four collections of Marathi poetry (*Arun Kolatkarcha Kavita*, *Chirimiri*, *Bhijki Vahi*, and *Droan*) and two collections of English poetry (*Kala Ghoda Poems* and *Sarpa Satra*). *Bhijki Vahi* won the Sahitya Akademi Award (India's National Academy of Letters) in 2005. He translated the medieval Marathi poet Tukaram's *abhangs* to English in 1966. He also worked in advertising firms as an art director and graphic designer, winning the prestigious Communication Artists Guild (CAG) award six times.

Through a close reading of *Jejuri* in general and of the three "Chaitanya" poems in particular, we attempt to understand the response of a post-colonial Indian poet who draws from the ambiguities and ironies of bhakti poetry to continue to re-imagine religious and social hierarchies. We will be reading Kolatkar as an inter-systemic poet-translator in a plural society where differences in language, belief, and culture co-exist and analyse *Jejuri* as a text that nudges the reader to dissociate with the known via contrasts and contradictions to enable a plurality of experiences. We attempt to see how this repertoire of signification enables the creation of poetry that echoes and re-forms a critique of hierarchical relationships with the divine legitimized and supported by institutionalized religion. The leitmotif of the *Jejuri* poems, the plurality of experiences, is also their spiritual fulcrum, a reminder of a social and spiritual diversity that is not vulnerable to the decay that appears to have set in both in the poet's time and in our own.

At the outset, it is important to understand what bhakti means. There is an ongoing argument among scholars about bhakti. Some scholars believe that it is a down-to-earth everyday religiosity best exemplified in the simple and rough rhetoric of poets of medieval India. Some scholars experience bhakti represented in Chaitanya's ecstasies that echo *Bhagavata Purana's* instructive verse – "If your body doesn't bristle, if your mind doesn't melt,/If your speech doesn't stutter when you weep with ecstasy,/If you don't have any bhakti, then how do you expect,/Your heart will stand a chance of being pure?" [Quoted in Hawley 2019, *142*]. These two moods are very different but as John Hawley claims that if we were to draw a line connecting them – we could call that line bhakti [Hawley 2019, *142*]. Thus, bhakti is an emotional identity, drawn from a wide spectrum

of religious acculturation which not only influenced and impacted Indian society but also created an atmosphere of continuous dialogue and mobility within the sub-continent. The natural vehicle of expression of bhakti has been poetry wrought in regional languages – the intimate vehicle of expression of the common man and woman. The poetry produced was developed on local literatures and inherited oral traditions, and the literariness of conventional poetic language was replaced by the spontaneity of everyday speech. There is a whole galaxy of bhakti poets in India, extant in almost all major Indian languages, between the eleventh and the seventeenth centuries, whose poetry is still read, sung, and quoted. Hawley says – "Bhakti is heart religion... the religion of participation, community, enthusiasm, song and often a personal challenge. It evokes the idea of a widely shared religiosity for which institutional superstructures weren't all that relevant and which once activated, could be historically contagious – a glorious disease of the collective heart" [Hawley, Novetzke… 2019, *3*]. Needless to say that Kolatkar also contracted this historically contagious disease and it is evident in his encounters with the priests, gods, animals, and objects of *Jejuri*. Bhakti poets challenge the hegemonic Brahmanical culture almost directly claiming from the divine the authority to criticize all established norms of institutionalized religion. Thus, the bhakti tradition of medieval India tried to repair the fault lines created and epitomised the diversity in the relations between human beings, god, and the world.

Navigating between Worlds as Inter-Systemic Poet-translator

According to Even-Zohar, all literary relational phenomena should not be regarded as isolated but should be put into a network. A literary system is "the network of the relations that is hypothesized to obtain between a number of activities called 'literary', and consequently, these activities themselves are observed via that network" [Even-Zohar 1990, *12*]. Zohar's polysystem contains the conception of a literary system as dynamic and heterogeneous. Kolatkar as a poet writing in Marathi and English and as a translator of the Marathi bhakti poet, Tukaram can access two literary systems thereby enabling a space for dialogue between these two systems. In the sea of inherited traditions of world literature such as "surrealism, William Burroughs, Dashiell Hammett, Indian mythology" he sought out the echoes of his own voice, but only found it in the haunting voices of the bhakti poets [Kolatkar 2005, *xiii*]. In the bhakti repertoire, he encountered the poetry of revelation, joy, irreverence, and heresy, a call to rebellion that stemmed from counter-systems that emerged from the margins which roused in him an impulse to translate these poems into English. Thus, once this treasure trove was discovered, the raven swooped down to loot and steal, Kolatkar becomes a scavenger, recycler, and finally cannibal [Zecchini 2014, *66*]. In being handed down a legacy of centuries-old word gems, he consumed and digested them, making them a part of his being, such that there was no difference between the medieval Marathi bhakti poet Tukaram and him. In this union of poet and poet, Tukaram and Kolatkar mirror each other, becoming one, such that it will be difficult for the reader-listener to tell the difference. Writes Kolatkar, "I'll create such confusion/that nobody can be sure about what you [Tukaram] wrote and what I did" and "I'm not gonna pan off your poems as mine/Salo Malo tried that…/that didn't work/I'll try to pass off mine as yours" [Mehrotra 2014]. In this desire to possess, he said, "I want to reclaim everything I consider my tradition" [de Souza 1999, *19*]. He saw himself as the next Tukaram and as Tukaram's self-proclaimed legal heir and as a translator he shows his critics what medieval mystic poets sound like in de-familiarized English.

Thus, one foot rooted in the local Marathi ethos and the other dipped in the global pool, this poet-translator juggles textual and oral traditions, histories, and languages in a cyclical spectacle of recollection and reinvention. Thus, *Jejuri*, "are completely convincing English poems, but their context remains just as completely Maharashtrian… in

sensibility and point of view" [Engblom 1982, *130*]. Kolatkar's understanding of both literary systems empowers him to reinterpret faith, institutional religion, and social and economic hierarchies in *Jejuri* as a site of the signification of bhakti poetry. As Ipshita Chanda points out "this opens up the question of literary modernity in the Indian context: the equalizing pluralist view of human life in this world that characterized earliest devotional poetry in 'modern' Indian languages was derived from one set of religious beliefs and questioned another set of religious beliefs, reinterpreting or repudiating faith in practices which contradicted the idea of plurality and equality in the eyes of God" [Chanda 2019, *98*].

Further, it is important to note that he is not composing this complex cycle of poems in Marathi but in English which compels a post-colonial reader (who can read poetry in English) to challenge their own cultural, hegemonic preconceptions through the very act of reading. Readers accompany the poet on this "pilgrimage" to *Jejuri* but are often dumbfounded by a simple straightforward doubt that the poet introduces – "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" [Kolatkar 2005, *22*]. Thus, influenced by the bhakti poets and specifically Tukaram, Kolatkar's poetry is a critique of all forms of hypocrisies, dogma, and blind conventions which are directed against such a society fashioned as a rejection from god himself, through his devotee the poet.

Tracing Influence to Confluence: Kolatkar's Reception of Bhakti Poetry

In consuming his bhakti poetic ancestors over a lifetime, possessing hundreds of *abhangs* within his being, and a decade of singing sessions with Balwant Bua, a Bhakti singer it is no surprise that his poems embody the bhakti voice [Zecchini 2014, *77*]. These poet-singers from the bhakti tradition offered Kolatkar the tools to speak truth to power, to don the garb of folk-singer-outcast and challenge conventions, pushing the limits of tradition, to enable a change in "seeing". Kolatkar appears to say, "I'll show you one more thing that the tradition can do" [Ramanujan & Daniels-Ramanujan 2001, *68*]. Further, the juggler himself covers "his linguistic tracks" confusing "those who want to define him according to an either/or identity" [Zecchini 2014, *70*]. Thus, while indulging in experiments with both forms, such as "banishment of capital letters, the treasuring of the concrete" and content in *Jejuri*, he is not systematic, thus saves himself from being pigeonholed, labelled and boxed [Kolatkar 2005, *xvi*]. As a juggler he stands "both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it", he thus inhabits both the sceptic and mystic in *Jejuri* [Whitman 1904, *127*]. Thus, it is not possible to dismiss them merely as the observations of an irreverent, sceptical advertising executive who was intrigued to visit the place seen from the window of his train compartment. The narrative voice of these poems is aware of a certain mysticism that can be sensed here despite the degradation and exploitation that can be seen all around and he is thus able to taste the divine sweetness of stones in the sterile, parched landscape of Jejuri.

In the meeting of the inner world of the poet and the outer world of Jejuri, the stone is transmuted and trans-substantiated into the body of the god, into the body of a poem. Thus, the juxtaposition of the sterile, lifeless wasteland with the vitality of even inanimate objects creates a compelling dynamic within the poems, resisting the prospect of reading them from a single perspective. In the meeting of the subject and object, the trivial is re-born in words on paper, to be endlessly renewed, written, and told. It is through this creative, god-like power of *poiesis* that objects are brought to life, and beings are transfigured and immortalized in poetry. Kolatkar held formal control over his material. His poems "had a huge gestation period before they were given their 'definite' form", his poetry was a "work-in-constant-progress", as he tested, "different patterns, genres

and languages and angles of vision" [Zecchini 2014, *13*]. Kolatkar's poetry is colloquial, unceremonious, and concise, picking images from everyday to voice his personal engagement with the divine. His poems are the stones that build up Jejuri in the reader's eye, offering a way of seeing through evocative visual images fashioned in his poetic idiom that speak directly to the reader, inviting them to "look", to seek, and to find. Thus, these precise, carefully crafted images in deceptively simple words invite the reader to peer at the poem from different angles, like a kaleidoscope, as its meanings shift seamlessly into new patterns.

Questions are posed about everything that is in Jejuri, so that reality is under suspicion. This is a questioning of our phenomenal world, and our perceptions of things as clinical categories. Kolatkar creates a "state of confusion over what's secular and what's miraculous" and thus, opens up our seeing of reality and pokes holes in our limited ways of seeing [Kolatkar 2005, *xvi*]. Thus, Kolatkar's pilgrim-poetry of the holy town of Jejuri is not dry metaphysics, binding the reader to a single vision and easy answers but is shifting eternally in its own impermanence. The poems invite you to dance in that liminal space between the poet's consciousness and the reader's, this is where the poem comes alive and its questions are revealed. Thus, while Kolatkar's poetry consists of re-invented texts that are modern in their formal aspects, metaphors, and linguistic variations there are echoes of the ambiguities and ironies of the bhakti tradition.

Kolatkar consumes all the characters in Jejuri, their animate and inanimate worlds, relating to them in an intimate way, in their own language, and spitting out poems. Throughout the *Jejuri* poems, we are introduced to a legion of characters, animals, and even inanimate objects that seem to have a life of their own. Apart from 18 distinct characters, Kolatkar introduces us to gods, mythical creatures, animals like the family of dogs in the Maruti temple in ruins or the temple rat as well as inanimate forms like a half-broken door, the figure of a tortoise outside the low temple or a worn-out cupboard, many of which acquire personalities in his verse, particularly because of the frequent use of similes and personification. Kolatkar commented on the "omnipresence of mythical birds and beasts in Indian poetry, but the lack of ordinary realities" [Zecchini 2014, *95*]. Thus, in the rocks and stones and half-broken door, Kolatkar sees mythic possibilities, these objects are alive, respiring with meaning. Writes Kolatkar, "It may not look like much./But watch out/When rubbish meets rubbish" [Kolatkar 2004, *35*]. The door is "A prophet half brought down from the cross" and yet, the "dangling martyr" morphs into "the local drunk", a "flayed man of muscles" [Kolatkar 2005, *9*]. Meanwhile, the defunct indicator at the railway station has "swallowed the names/of all the railway/stations it knows" [Kolatkar 2005, *45*]. In Kolatkar's verse, bronze can be "amused" while stones are capable of smiling [Kolatkar 2005, *11*] and "the moon" "has come down/to graze along the hill top" [Kolatkar 2005, *28*].

He draws from the bhakti tradition's subversive poetics, to bring the margins into sharper focus and question social hierarchies, hence in Jejuri, the "old woman", the "temple dancer", and the temple rat are brought from the periphery to the center. When the world is turned on its head, the insignificant becomes mythic, and one's vision clears, traversing beyond the frontiers of "perceptual blinkers, pre-given representations and intellectual conditionings" [Zecchini 2014, *103*]. The encounter with Jejuri's helpless old woman begging on "hills as wretched as these", who has bullet holes for eyes, can crack open the world of *Jejuri*, accounting for her transfiguration through *vision*. As Kolatkar writes: "And the temples crack/And the sky falls/with a plateglass clatter/around the shatterproof crone" as "you are reduced/to so much small change/ in her hand" [Kolatkar 2005, *16*]. These experiences transform Kolatkar, such that as he departs from Jejuri, he acknowledges that it carries "a few questions knocking in your (his) head" [Kolatkar 2005, *43*].

The Poetic Structure of the Three Chaitanya Poems²

Much like a Russian matryoshka doll, the 31-poem sequence contains nested within it, a three-poem sequence. All three poems are titled "Chaitanya" and share formal links and connected themes. This embedded poem sequence simulates the chanting of a mantra – it resonates through the *Jejuri* poems building a certain rhythm through recurrence. The "Chaitanya" poems offer several layers of interpretation. There is of course the historical Chaitanya – the bhakti movement saint who is believed to have visited Jejuri during his travels to South India in the early 16th century. Then there is the philosophical concept of Chaitanya – the idea that it is the consciousness that links every individual being to infinite universal life. Seen through this lens, Chaitanya is the life force that runs through every person, animal, or thing that one encounters in these poems. As the narrator navigates through the landscape of this temple town of Jejuri and the reader negotiates through the myriad of characters, places, and artefacts in Kolatkar's verse, "Chaitanya" is something/someone that both circle back to.

The poems also act as a counterpoint to the moments when the poet is forced to confront the grim realities of a place like Jejuri. Most of these encounters are brief – the old woman, the Vaghya, or the Murli are never mentioned again. Many others like the old man in the bus or a group of musicians appear to have non-speaking parts; they don't get a poem all to themselves. Through the figure of the priest, however, he questions religious hierarchies, and thus we find this character with a recurring role. We are introduced to him in the second poem itself, where we see him waiting for the bus of pilgrims to arrive. In an extended metaphor of a lizard, he is presented like a predator, "ready to eat pilgrim/held between its teeth" [Kolatkar 2005, *5*]. The second time we encounter the priest is during the poet's visit to "A Low Temple" where the two get into an argument over the number of arms of the Goddess. The sceptic can count that the statue in the temple has 18 arms, but the priest, the holder of knowledge, insists that she has eight. We meet the priest a third time in "The Blue Horse" when a group of local musicians has agreed to give a private concert for the poet at the priest's house. They argue again, this time over the colour of Khandoba's horse – white in an image on the wall, but blue in the song of the toothless singer. Khandoba, the presiding deity at Jejuri is a regional folk god and was primarily a god of herdsmen. The cult of Khandoba is at least older than the 12th century, which can be determined by references in Jain and Lingayat texts and inscriptions [Sontheimer 1984, *156*]. Khandoba is also known as Malhari, Mallari, or Martanda Bhairava with reference to the form that the god Shiva took while fighting off demons, especially Mani and Malla. According to the *Brahmanda Purana*, these demons had usurped *triloka* (the three worlds – heaven, earth, and atmosphere) and were ruling over them. The demons set out to kill Brahmans and cows evoking the wrath of the gods. Shiva, on the gods Indra and Vishnu's request, killed them releasing them from their ignorance and bondage and thus they became forever associated with Khandoba. There are also oral stories that portray Khandoba as a king who rules from his fortress at Jejuri and holds court and distributes gold.

Is it a mere coincidence that there are three encounters with the priest, who is a stand-in for the worst excesses of the merely ritualistic observation of religious practice that the poet sees all over Jejuri, and three "Chaitanya" poems, that reflect on a different level of signification about the relationship between the individual and the divine? Has Kolatkar deliberately contrasted the priest, who appears to be weighed down with material concerns and is blinded by his beliefs, with the mystic saint Chaitanya, who is able to transcend the material world and is liberated by his faith?

Chaitanya: History and Myth

Chaitanya is an important concept in Indian philosophy, a Sanskrit word, which is often translated as either "consciousness" or "spirit" or "holder of intellectuality". Although

commentators vary in their interpretations of individual terms, they agree as to the purport of the whole, the identification of the universal being or *Brahman*, and consequently its identity with all the other types of beings. *Brahman* is one Consciousness that pervades the entire world from the most insignificant to its highest expression, transcending all differences (religious, social, economic). This very idea brings about a more coherent view of the universe and man. This worldview transforms the link between human beings and the cosmos from a ritual act to the knowledge of relationships. It is out of this insight that the equation *Brahman* is equal to *atman* is formulated in the *Upanishads*.

Chaitanya is also indicative of the theological founder of Gaudiya Vaishnavism of the 16th century Bengal who was the famous propagator of *Achintya-Bheda-Abheda* school of Vedanta philosophy. In Gaudiya Vaishnavism, consciousness is not material, it is indicative of the soul. All living beings (*jivas*) have a soul which is not linked with the physical body – the soul is eternal and absolute, and remains unchanged by neither birth nor death. The unreality of the phenomenal world around us is explored and the realisation of its limitations is the threshold of our awareness (*chaitanya*) of the unlimited. Reason and logic do not create this reality rather they respond to it on their own terms. Thus the philosophers demarcate a clear tripartite domain that expands outward from the intrinsic realm of knowledge – the path of *jnana* (knowledge) leads one to *sat* (truth/existence), *karma* (will) to *cit* (consciousness), and *bhakti* (feeling of love) to *ananda* (happiness) – hence leading one to the subjective experience of the ultimate unchanging reality of *Satchidananda* Brahman. The philosophy *achintya-bheda-abheda* is representative of one-ness and difference. In Sanskrit, *achintya* translates to inconceivable, *bheda* to difference, and *abheda* to non-difference. The idea is the impersonal and the personal conception is simultaneously present in everything thus leading to simultaneous oneness and difference. Relationality is a distinctive feature of bhakti and is at the root of Chaitanya's enterprise of *achintya-bheda-abheda*, the inconceivable co-presence of difference and non-difference at all levels [Hawley, Novetzke… 2019]. Empowered by the *bhakti* logic of *achintya-bheda-abheda*, Chaitanya manifested a continual dynamic of protesting and empowering. Not only did he liberate logical minds from the chains of binary oppositions – *bheda* and *abheda* – he also debilitated the logic of caste.

What is sacred and what is profane? What is animate and what is inanimate? The binary oppositions of *bheda* and *abheda* are called into question in *Jejuri*. In "The Doorstep" we are told that "That's no doorstep/It's a pillar on its side/Yes/That's what it is", thus inviting the reader to alternative ways of seeing [Kolatkar 2005, *7*]. In the "Heart of Ruin", while it is evident that this dilapidated structure is no longer a temple, Kolatkar writes that it is "nothing less than the house of god" [Kolatkar 2005, *6*]. In "Manohar" although Kolatkar ends with, "It's just a cow shed", one is compelled to *see* a temple [Kolatkar 2005, *14*]. In "A Low Temple", one wrestles with the truth, for the 18-armed goddess that is evident through perception, is the eight-armed goddess, as argued by the priest. The priest's son tells us that "these five hills/are the five demons/that khandoba killed", when asked if he believes the story, the boy responds with, "look/there's a butterfly/there" [Kolatkar 2005, *20*]. As Kolatkar reminds us in *Jejuri*, "the dividing line if it exists/is very thin at jejuri" [Kolatkar 2005, *22*]. Thus, in travelling with the poet and inhabiting his imagination, the ever-shifting dividing line is transferred from the poet's mind into the reader's mind.

Analysis of the "Chaitanya" Poems

The "Chaitanya" poems draw their power not only from their repeated appearance but also from the specific positions they occupy in the overall sequence. They aren't tossed willy-nilly into the sequence, but each appears at a significant moment of the imagined day that the poet spends at Jejuri. The first poem comes just before "A Low Temple", when the poet engages in his first confrontation with the priest, and outlines the nature of

the spiritual connection between devotee and deity. This is the kind of intimate relationship where the former feels comfortable enough to direct orders "wipe the red paint off your face" or presume to know that Khandoba likes *zendu* (marigold) flowers [Kolatkar 2005, *10*]. This free-flowing personal connection comes in sharp contrast with the rigid, unyielding stance that the priest takes up in the subsequent poem. This juxtaposition of an intimate spiritual connection with the remote almost aloof attitude of the priest is the crux of the debate that plays out in the sequence. The emphasis on the personal links back to the bhakti movement, albeit in Kolatkar's own way. Just as bhakti poets express the direct encounter with the divine through poetry, Kolatkar documents his personal experiences in the temple town of Jejuri in this collection. He stated that "the only kind of personal statement I know how to make is to write a poem" [quoted in Zecchini 2014, *14*]. The difference is that while bhakti poetry stems out of self-knowledge and deep meditative insight, Kolatkar's poetry is not the revelation of transcendental truth, but merely questions posed to it. Thus, this poem, bhakti in tone, is provocative; the language of the gods is stone language, earthy, rooted, and unceremonious, not distant in alien tongues that come from the clouds above. And as a translator, Kolatkar will translate the stony language of the gods into English. He wanted to share with the world the joy and delight in Tukaram's irreverent, subversive, mystic poetry. Responding to the criticism of *Jejuri*, Kolatkar said: "As far as irreverence goes, there is irreverence found in Tukaram. Just because it is devotional poetry it is not wishy-washy… Sometimes they make fun of the poses of God. Tukaram says he is willing to come down to gutter level if necessary in dealing with God" [de Souza 1989, *82*].

Chaitanya does not need to label a stone and colour it red to offer his bhakti, for he knows that god lies beyond that. In an act of personal devotion, he will still offer flowers that he likes to this stone, his communion is so close with god that he knows that god too likes these flowers, so close are they that they are of one mind, and no response from the stone indicates that speech is no longer needed. The ritual becomes symbolic of a relationship of love, unmediated by the priest. Chaitanya addresses god directly, in intimate irreverence, without the mediation of ritual. The rudeness is directed at our flawed perception, not god. We colour the objects around us through our perception, weaving the veil of *maya*, hiding their true reality. The poem in displacing the ritual points to a higher truth and becomes the vehicle for the sacred. In dismantling our perspective, our frame of reference is altered, and we go beyond our conceptual, constructed minds, to taste the sweetness of rocks and hear their speech.

In naming the rock we name its devotees, categorizing them as pure and impure, and deciding who is to be denied access to the red-faced god. The red-paint labels god, telling you his name and assigning limited meaning. It is the red paint that is impure and unnatural, that separates the god from its people and hence god is ordered to cleanse himself of it. In stepping out of contextual frameworks, the gods break free into multiple ways of being. As stones trampled beneath the pilgrim's feet, these "gods" do not discriminate and do not mind being walked all over. Like Whitman's grass, if you want to look for them, you will find them in the "dirt" in your *chappals* (sandals). Kolatkar asks, "What is stone"? [Kolatkar 2005, *22*]. The stone is both stone and god, just as in "The Door", the door is both door and prophet. It stands in its own ambiguity, inhabiting oneness and difference, malleable allowing for transmutation, allowing the artist-god through the alchemy of words to convert stone into a god. In his breaking of linguistic and poetic conventions, Kolatkar cleanses himself of the ritual of rules, creating spoken poems that are concise and direct, yet offering visual epiphanies.

One can read Chaitanya as a Christ-like figure, arguing against temple ritual in the first Chaitanya poem, converting stones into gods sweet as grapes in the second, and his "flock" gazes at their shepherd on the hill in the third, as he disappears from the seen into the unseen. The significance of the Chaitanya poems is not limited to the linkages to the

bhakti movement saint. Chaitanya, as mentioned earlier, means consciousness, and these three poems embody the poet's consciousness. The bhakti tradition, in its oral nature, literally places its words in your mouth as living utterances, passing on the song-insight, from body to body. In the Chaitanya poems, Kolatkar admits that "The words that I have put in his mouth are imaginary bhakti songs" and Chaitanya speaks English [de Souza 1999, *82*]. Kolatkar as a poet inhabits the consciousness of Chaitanya as a mystic poet. It is the poetic and spiritual truth of the poem that is brought to life in the poet's consciousness, and later the reader's consciousness, and when Kolatkar as a reader writes poems that we as readers consume, and are all brought together as both one and many. In consuming Kolatkar's poems we consume Chaitanya.

The second "Chaitanya" poem comes perhaps at the most critical moment of the sequence – it immediately follows "An Old Woman", a moment where the poet is "reduced / to so much small change / in her hand" [Kolatkar 2005, *16*]. Of all the episodes of *Jejuri*, this is a moment when the poet is at his most vulnerable, the least self-assured. The encounter with this old woman sends him reeling and it is only by retreating into himself, in the abstract plane of his consciousness that he is able to rebound. This is also the poem that delineates the creative process where the actions of the saint in the poem closely mimic those of the poet at *Jejuri*. In the poem Chaitanya pops a stone "sweet as grapes" into his mouth and "spat out gods", just the poet swallows his experiences at *Jejuri* and spits out poetry [Kolatkar 2005, *17*]. The connection between consumption and creation is within the bhakti tradition. In a Kolatkar translation of Janabai[3] titled, "Jani 1", we have, "i eat god / i drink god... god is within / god is without / and moreover / there is god to spare" [Kolatkar 1982, *114*]. In the stony gods of Jejuri's landscape, "there is god to spare". Just as the blood of Christ is wine, the gods of Jejuri are as sweet as grapes. In the act of consumption, the speaker becomes one with god. The poems are the stones, reinvented, eaten, and digested by the poet-seer, thus the immanent is made transcendent. This skilful shaping of stones into gods and gods into poems, there is the artistic creation of making the every day remarkable.

The stone that is alive and speaks is imbued with higher spiritual meaning. Kolatkar reaffirms the living force that runs through all forms, by animating even the inanimate stones of *Jejuri*. The relationship of love and equality, the coexistence of difference and non-difference is the shared basis of the ethics that spans different regions, religions, and languages of the subcontinent. Tagore in his book *The Religion of Man* proposes "to realise the god in man is a larger faith". Thus, through the idea of unity, man realizes the eternal in his life, and "consciousness of this unity is spiritual, and our effort to be true to it is our religion" [Tagore 1922]. The innermost truth is found in the presence of the divine *within* the self.

Concurrent with the world of priests, devotees, temples in shambles, and reservoirs running dry, we are also introduced to the world of myth and wonder. Tales of Khandoba's courage, origin stories of the sect of the Vaghyas, and even the voice of "a second class god" like Yeshwant Rao[4] is threaded through the poem sequence which simultaneously evokes the ordinary everyday reality of Jejuri and its mythic possibilities [Kolatkar 2005, *38*]. Drawing from the myths of Jejuri Kolatkar calls the reader to bear witness to "hills/demons/cactus fang/in sky meat" [Kolatkar 2005, *18*]. As Kolatkar writes in "A Scratch"[5], the abundance of stones in Jejuri can only be matched by the profusion of gods here – "scratch a rock/and a legend springs" [Kolatkar 2005, *22*]. Thus, in this world of legends and myths, Chaitanya the saint fits in seamlessly. We know so little about the saint and his visit that he merges into myth and legend. Chaitanya is able to speak to stones "in stone language, swallow stones and spit out gods, and command the attention of 'a herd of legends' " [Kolatkar 2005, *10, 42*]. Thus, the figure of Chaitanya is not only a counterpoint to the possible cynicism of several of the grim encounters in contemporary Jejuri, but he is also a link to the mythic world that is also created in the poems. In these

three poems, the historical Chaitanya and the mythical saint merge, providing the site for harmonizing two planes of existence in Jejuri – the mundane world of the every day and the sacred one of faith and divine possibilities. The way of seeing reveals the "seer".

The final "Chaitanya" poem is the last poem staged in *Jejuri* for the poet starts off for the railway station in the one that follows. This contemplative poem captures the essence of Kolatkar's *Jejuri* encounter. In Naik's view, this poem "makes it plain that the visit of the saint has made no difference to the place" [Naik 1995, *88–89*]. He asserts this because the "herd of legends" paused for a moment in his presence, but "returned to its grazing" on his departure [Kolatkar 2005, *42*]. Critics have linked Chaitanya's departure with that of Kolatkar's in the subsequent poem. It is as if this poem is a cypher to interpret the impact of Kolatkar's visit – nothing changed, nothing ventured, nothing gained. The significance of the visit is in its insignificance. However, like everything else in *Jejuri*, the poem's meaning cannot be limited to a single perspective. Poems are a way of playing with questions in exploring landscapes, walking around and through them into their infinite, open-ended "meanings".

Hence, one reading of this poem is that its emancipatory visuals offer liberation from the constraints and confines of the previous poems. Unlike the priests who keep their gods in the dark, locked in cupboards and low temples, Chaitanya who cleansed the gods in the first "Chaitanya" poem, now liberates them into the natural landscape of the hills beneath the open sky. In this pastoral landscape, a Christ-like Chaitanya symbolically transforms "legends" into a herd. One remembers the myths of Jejuri here since the presiding deity *Khandoba* is a shepherd god, worshipped by the *Dhangars*, a herding community of Maharashtra. The herd represents the long-heard legends of a community held together through time in Jejuri's hills. A herd as one takes an assimilated form so that the legends are not inanimate, isolated stones closed in on themselves, but a community.

Myth and reality seamlessly merge as the legend that is Chaitanya observes "a herd of legends" that in turn look back upon him [Kolatkar 2005, *42*]. Legend looking at legend, mirror on the mirror, each creates the other through recognition. As is true of several animals in *Jejuri*, the herd seems wiser than the humans as they have access to Chaitanya wisdom at this moment. It is perhaps because they are not limited by language that they can "see" with greater clarity. With lamb-like innocence, these bare stones bear witness, their eyes are not sore from redness and they see with clarity. The herd that witnessed Chaitanya's walking by, and is present in the *now*, legends folded within their being. The significance of *vision* in Kolatkar's verse, the implication of *seeing* coalesce in this one moment that also expands to include the poet and the reader, and one wonders who is watching whom? While the herd is watching Chaitanya, the poet is watching both, creating a poem spectacle, through which we as readers watch this spectacle. In this collaborative construction of the scene, altered perceptions shatter and crack open the world of *Jejuri* to the point that all boundaries dissolve. Krishna Chaitanya's enterprise of *achintya-bheda-abheda* is grounded in this recognition, relationality, and the coexistence of difference and non-difference at all levels.

The "pilgrim-observer" remains transfixed, time is suspended, and "text, narrative and poet-spectator are transfixed and silenced" [Zecchini 2014, *108*]. The past, present, and future merge in a silent "spot of time". In our encounter with the sacred, we become as still as a rock. The idea that either the saint or the poet's visit needs to have an everlasting impact denies the significance of the present. The sacred is experienced in the immediate present, on earth in the here and now. Kolatkar overwhelmingly uses the present tense and present progressive [Zecchini 2014, *138*]. Even the becoming of the poem is experienced in the reader's mind in the *now*. The cow bell rings in the mystical experience, like the ritual of striking the temple bell rings in the devotee's prayer. These moments of insight, both spiritual and poetic, are ephemeral and we return to our "grazing", the everyday business of life. Although one returns to the everyday, having read Kolatkar,

however one's *vision* is altered and we see the transcendent in the every day. This pilgrimage journey takes Kolatkar back to the bustling city of Bombay and we as readers turn back to our worlds. However, it isn't a static return; we carry *Jejuri* and its inhabitants that we will continue to graze on.

One can trace the cycle of time in the framework of the Jejuri pilgrimage from sunrise to sunset, and internally within this poem in the cows grazing, gazing up; returning to grazing, and in Chaitanya's cyclical return in time. As Kolatkar reminds us, "the setting sun" is as "large as a wheel" [Kolatkar 2005, *51*]. This hints towards the fluid, open, cyclical movement in time. Just as we cannot pin Chaitanya down, we can't pin Kolatkar down, for they are both on the move, on the road, which is the space that bhakti inhabits. In these poems, their journeys meet and we become the "herd of legends", the community of readers, bearing witness to their meeting. Is Chaitanya speaking Kolatkar's words, or is Kolatkar speaking Chaitanya's words? We can't tell the difference. The juggler smiles.

Conclusion

This study of the *Jejuri* poems examines Kolatkar's process of poetic signification that puts under scrutiny conventional social and religious hierarchies. In doing so, he is both responding to his contemporary realities as well as all time. Their relevance in our times is undeniable. Kolatkar's poetry renews the bhakti tradition of his time and enables its recreation through his readers located in their hyper-religious presence. In contemporary times a grand narrative is being drafted in India based on mounting majoritarianism and religious polarisation. Through the analysis of Kolatkar's *Jejuri* we have tried to trace a repertoire of signification refigured by time, place, and language, but germinating from a common ethos of pluralism. Scholars have documented the influence of the bhakti poets on Kolatkar, but this close examination of his *Jejuri* poems reveals to us that the relationship extends beyond influence to confluence. The poet's creative experience takes the course of the pendulum, exploring a wide range of experiences and often contradictory perspectives, but inexorably returning like a chant to the bhakti tradition as a living consciousness, as mystical, as myth, the recurrent, becoming the centering life force that abounds in all of *Jejuri*, which in itself becomes a microcosm for all reality. Literature is tasked with repairing the fault lines created by institutionalised religion, and in the lineage of their poetic ancestors, contemporary poets are also called to draw from this repertoire to create poetry that responds to their times. In the current climate of this country, the reservoirs are dry, the earth is parched, and time is ripe for a "second" coming of Chaitanya and as time turns circles around Chaitanya will return.

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[1] The *Jejuri* poems include a group of 30 poems starting from "The Bus" to "Between Jejuri and the Railway Station". These are followed by a section titled "The Railway Station" which contains within it a group of six poems. Since Kolatkar himself included this six-poem sequence under a singular title, we have taken the count of the poems to be 31.

[2] **Chaitanya (1)**
come off it
said chaitanya to a stone
in stone language

wipe the red paint off your face
i don't think the colour suits you
i mean what's wrong
with being just a plain stone
i'll still bring you flowers
you like the flowers of zendu
don't you
i like them too

Chaitanya (2)
sweet as grapes
are the stones of jejuri
said chaitanya

he popped a stone
in his mouth
and spat out gods

Chaitanya (3)
a herd of legends
on a hill slope
looked up from its grazing
when chaitanya came in sight

the hills remained still
when chaitanya
was passing by
a cowbell tinkled
when he disappeared from view
and the herd of legends
returned to its grazing

[3] Janabai (1298–1350) was a bhakti poet in the Varkari religious tradition in Maharashtra. She was also born to a *sudra* (low-caste) couple and worked all her life as a domestic servant in the household of the prominent Marathi bhakti poet Nāmdev. However, while she was tied to the material, enduring a life of hardship, in the reimagining of the sacred, she gains freedom.

[4] Yeshwant Rao's idol stands outside the main Jejuri temple. He doesn't possess a head, arms, or legs, and yet as a god, he has miraculous powers of bone setting and mending. Hence, devotees offer wooden arms and legs to him. It is believed that a man especially from the Matang (low-caste) community of Maharashtra would sacrifice a limb before the construction work of a fort, bridge, or dam and the success of such constructions fully depended on this sacrifice. Yeshwant Rao is modeled on the idea of this sacrificed man who was deified posthumously.

[5] **A Scratch**
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

there is no crop
other than god
and god is harvested here
around the year
and round the clock
out of the bad earth
and the hard rock

that giant hunk of rock
the size of a bedroom
is Khandoba's wife turned to stone
the crack that runs right across
is the scar from his broadsword
he struck her down with
once in a fit of rage

scratch a rock
and a legend springs

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С. Банерджі, Г. Менданья, А. Дутта
Паломництво до поезії: читання "Джедзурі"
як міжсистемна літературна рецепція

В усій середньовічній Індії поети-бгакти, ставлячи запитання і переосмислюючи стосунки з божественним, намагалися залагодити розломи, створені інституціалізованою релігією. Арун Колаткар, двомовний постколоніальний індійський поет і перекладач середньовічної поезії бгактів, що писали мовою маратхі, черпає з їхньої спадщини сенси для поетичної збірки "Джедзурі", написаної англійською мовою, щоб відповідати своєму часу. Він є мостом між цими двома світами й періодами в історії літератури та допомагає нам переглянути нашу систему поглядів так, щоб можна було глибше зрозуміти різні шляхи взаємодії з божественним. Поет наповнює свої вірші живими й нерухомими мешканцями Джедзурі, паломницького храмового міста в Магараштрі (Індія), і як нащадок своїх літературних

предків поетичними запитаннями критикує і переосмислює інституціалізовану релігію та ієрархії. Його оманливо прості вірші немов лаконічні, старанно промальовані картини пам'яті є цеглинками, що будують зовнішній світ "Джедзурі" й спонукають до трансформації уявний внутрішній світ читача. У "Джедзурі" час циклічний і мінливий, але від дотику до істини час зупиняється і світ "Джедзурі" розкривається. Поєднуючи погляд скептика й бачення містика, Арун Колаткар закликає читача замислитися над мінливістю значень культурних інструментів. Отже, його поезія запрошує читача протидіяти дихотомії і бінарним протиставленням, надаючи місце філософії *ачінтья-бгеда-абгеда* – вченню про єдність і різноманіття. Звертаючись у процесі уважного прочитання всієї збірки "Джедзурі", і зокрема трьох віршів "Чайтанья", до полісистемної теорії, автори цієї статті шукають у віршах поета відповідь на розломи світосприйняття, породжені інституціалізованою релігією.

Ключові слова: Арун Колаткар, "Джедзурі", релігійна поезія, традиція бгакті, південноазійські релігії, постколоніальна література, "Чайтанья", переклад