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Living at the Edges: The Pangs of Bhakti in Arun Kolatkar's Poetry

Dr. Hari M G

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Amrita University, Coimbatore,
Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

Among the many literary traditions that shaped literary milieu of modern Indian English Poetry, Bhakti tradition has been the most influential. It is secular literary legacy that survives in the best voices of modern Indian English Poetry. Of all the modern Indian English Poets who came under the sway of Bhakti, it is, arguably, Arun Kolatkar, who assimilated the sensibility of the saint-poets the most. This paper tries to bring out the emotional spectrum that can be mapped in Kolatkar's poetry which invariably evokes the pangs and ecstasy of Bhakti.

Keywords

Arun Kolatkar; Bhakti; Pangs; Ecstasy.



The saints of the Bhakti tradition have been the belligerent voices of freedom and emotional sublimity for many centuries. Their poetry reflected their radical outlook towards life and the lack of faith in establishments; they celebrated the mystery of life, with the firm conviction that “each of us forms a personal relationship with this inexplicable mystery of life” (Schelling xiv). The contradictions and ironies of life that theology seeks to domesticate and iron out through theorization were thrown in the open by these saints and they relished life by accepting all contradictions that constitute life. For them, God was not a disciplinarian head master with a cane in his hand to punish the erring kids; god to them was a soul-mate, companion with whom they shared informal and intimate relationship. As the noted poet, Arundhathi Subramaniam says, “they were incendiary dreamers who refused to be mere worshippers, anarchic visionaries who refused to be mere inheritors. They were less god-fearing than god-possessed, less content to receive an ancient wisdom than impatient to express their own tempestuous interiority.” (Subramaniam xii) God, for them, was a no more a “distant promise, impersonated in stone, incarcerated in theory, gridlocked in transcendent eternalism”, but a “pulsating throb in the here and now” (Subramaniam xix). The poetry of the saints has been very influential in modern Indian literature. Among Indian English Poets, it is, arguably, Arun Kolatkar, who assimilated the sensibility of the saint-poets the most. Kolatkar’s poetry, stands out preeminently from the rest who were influenced by Bhakti tradition, in the way he transposes the tropes of Bhakti to the material world, without losing the intensity and passion that marks the poetry of the saint-poets Kolatkar’s poems can be read along the 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. It is in this context that this paper seeks delve into the ‘interior landscapes’ of bhakti in Kolatkar’s poetry.

A K Ramanujan locates the dichotomy between the *sthavara*, the stable, and the *jangama*, the moving, at the very heart of Bhakti poetry (*Speaking of Shiva* 2). The *sthavara* conception of the divine reduces divinity to a predictable place within a neatly categorized world. As opposed to this, the saints upheld a philosophy of the *jangama*, the moving with respect to divinity and the world. God was not a static reality for them but a vibrant presence that can be felt in all forms of life. Thus, the moving human body is more symbolic of the divine than the static temple, for Basava: The rich will make temples for Siva.

What shall I,
 a poor man, do?
 My legs are pillars,
 the body the shrine,
 the head a cupola of gold.
 Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,
 things standing shall fall, but the moving ever shall stay.
 ("Vachana 820" 1-12)

The thrust on movement and transience also makes it possible to have echoes of Bhakti and the songs of American Blue singers simultaneously in Kolatkar's poetry. As A K Mehrotra points out,

Blues (though it can have a spiritual side) and bhakti poetry are, in intent, markedly different from each other. One belongs to the secular world; the addresses itself to god. There are, however, parallels between them. Each draws its images from a common pool, each limits itself to a small number of themes that it keeps returning to, and each speaks in the idiom of the street. ("Death of a Poet" 30)

Both these traditions stood for a *jangama* worldview that readily embraced the ephemeral nature of life. While the saint-poets saw the ever changing drama of life as a play of the divine, the blue singers celebrated their awareness of the

fragility of social identity. Both the traditions grew into counter-cultures that gave space for a bohemian lifestyle. The poems in the “Words for Music” section of *The Boatride and Other Poems* display Kolatkar’s keen interest in the music of blues. Kolatkar was, in fact, a great admirer of music, especially the music of the blues and the Bhakti songs sung by Bhajan singers like Belvantbua. The poems in this section are mostly light-hearted depictions of experiences drawn from the days when he was a heavy drinker. What makes these poems stand out is the poet’s uncanny ability to bring a musical quality to his words and a poetic celebration of a bohemian lifestyle. The poetic persona comes out in these poems as a person who experiences almost an ethereal surrender in the not so happy experiences that come the way of a drunkard. His translations of bhakti poems have also the same casual familiarity of the carefree attitude that blues and the saints shared. But, in these poems, mainly in the poems of Tukaram, the lifestyle of the vagabond attains higher dimensions:

We are the enduring bums.
Thieves regard us with consternation.
When we go out and beg
Dogs manage our households.

Get lost, brother, if you don’t
Fancy our kind of living.
There’s no better way
Of growing to greatness of soul. (“We are the enduring bums” 1-8)

The lifestyle of the saints is a ‘way of growing to the greatness of soul’ because it provides a space where the uncertainties of life and the suffering associated with it can be accepted. The inner mysteries opened before the itinerant saints when they forsook all the investment in the outer world. But the path towards those mysteries is fraught with intense suffering. As Arundhathi Subramaniam notes, the saints were acutely conscious of the

'border game' they were playing: "She was an insurgent who knew the perils of the border game she was playing, and the yawning chasm that lay just beyond the horizon of her insatiable yearning." (*Eating God* xxvi) Thus, we have poems which are marked by utter despair and even anger at their deities who have brought them to such a situation. Chandidas, says of Bhakti that "it is an absorbing tale of an illness that does not end in the grave" (21-22). Kabir begs of God to take him in, as he has already left everything and has nowhere to go: "I've nowhere to turn/ Says Kabir, let me in." ("Untitled", *Songs of Kabir* 12-13) But the saint who most evocatively painted the woes of being caught in an in-between space, without being sure of anything, is Tukaram. Tukaram stands out, among the saint-poets, since he is more close to the divided self and doubts of the modern man. When other saints had convictions regarding their spiritual experiences and ridiculed those who sing of the divine without any real experience, Tuka is even doubtful of his own experiences, and admits in some poems that he is talking about God without having any real taste of him:

My knowledge of you
Is reproduced
From learnt words;
It's like
A treasure
Extracted
From a mirror.
When will you become
Real for me
O Lord? ("Untitled", *Says Tuka* 21, 1-11)

The legend has it that Namdev appeared in dream of Tuka, who was a householder, and commanded him to write poems praising Vithoba. Thus, this divide between the actual spiritual experience and the words on the spiritual, marks Tuka's poetry and hence, it is fraught with touching scenes and

situations of a man caught deep-seated anguish. And thus, he is quite close to the modern man in his predicament. Dilip Chitre speaks at length about the existential dimensions that Tuka brought to Bhakti, and how it mirrors the predicament of modern man, in his introduction to *Says Tuka*:

Tukaram gave Bhakti itself new existential dimensions. In this he was anticipating the spiritual anguish of modern man two centuries ahead of his time. He was also anticipating a form of personal, confessional poetry that seeks articulate liberation from the deepest traumas man experiences and represses out of fear. Tukaram's poetry expresses pain and bewilderment, fear and anxiety, exasperation and desperateness, boredom and meaninglessness – in fact, all feelings that characterize modern self-awareness. (xxxix)

For Tuka, spirituality is something that he suffered and gained and he traversed the path that begins with doubting himself and to some extent the God whom he worships, with at most honesty – “the singular quest of a rigorously honest man” (Schelling 91). Hence, we have some great poems of him which map the anxiety filled zones of in-betweenness:

An emigrant now, I'm
A citizen of No Land;
I gave up Sansara
Without gaining you.
If only I'd known,
Says Tuka,
I'd have desisted
From such folly. (“There's no percentage” 13-20)

He is not a saint who is sure about the road he has taken to, and quite often is skeptical about his own spiritual convictions. It is interesting to note that when Kolatkar translated Tukaram, he chose mostly those poems which

depict the angst and insecurity of Tuka. He might have felt the grey areas of Bhakti where the devotee is in his most hopeless situation quite resembling the Kafkaesque state of mind Kolatkar tries to bring home in some of his earlier poems. But in Kolatkar's poems, it manifests not in the lives of those who have 'given up samsara in the quest for divine', but in the lives of those who lose the sense of reality and certainty in the midst of the excesses of modern urban life. Most of the poems that he wrote before the publication of *Jejuri* belong to this category. In the poem, "Been Working on this Statue", the precarious nature of the sense of self that we nurture and try to protect at any cost is depicted with a pinch of irony and sarcasm. The statue that the poetic persona has been working on is "getting nowhere, it's only going from bad to worse" (2). The statue here stands for the 'self' of the sculptor as it is depicted as a replica of himself in all respects. Finally he decides to immerse the statue in the sea and get rid of the labour and pain he suffers in giving shape to it: "I'll drive right on into the sea/yeah we'll go for a ride the two of us just me and him/we'll find out what's what and who's who for one of us can swim" (37-40). The poem, "Today I feel I do not belong", portrays a state of mind where not even ray of hope enters, leaving one with a terrible feel of nothingness:

O! I don't know what to think. I'm
no more sure what my sex is. I feel
I'm going round in circles. But no
– the thought presumes an axis
what am I like? Open and see
precisely nothing in a lot of boxes
(22-27)

What makes Kolatkar not just another bleak existential poet who has nothing other than solipsistic brooding to offer is the evolution of the self that unfolds in his poetry. When juxtaposed, his poems brings forth various images of the self at different stages of evolution. He does not get stuck with a

solipsistic obsession with the dark shades of self. There is a movement in the depiction of the self in his poetry. If some poems depict the otherness of the self, there are also poems wherein the self gets erased through suffering. Suffering intensely make the egoistic tendencies in the mind subside and makes one humble. In “The Turnaround”, the poetic persona is an itinerant who is not at-home anywhere he goes to. The poem is born out of a journey that the poet went for, along with his painter friend Bendu Wase. Kolatkar told A K Mehrotra, while the latter was speaking to the poet in the context of editing *The Boat Ride*, that he went for this journey after a ‘personal crisis’ in his life, although he did not precisely say what the crisis was (Mehrotra, “Death of a Poet” 19) . But whatever it be, in the tone of this poem there is an element where suffering is accepted gracefully. There is an unassumingness in the poetic persona’s attitude towards suffering. For instance, the experience of being accused as a thief and being forced to clean the temple where the poetic persona was sleeping the previous night is depicted in a very matter-of-fact style:

Then came Rotegaon
Where I went on trial
And had to drag the carcass away
When howling all night
A dog died in the temple
Where I was trying to get some sleep. (25-30)

But what happens through the alchemy of suffering is worthy. The spirit of self-abnegation through sufferings underpins this poem. The journey gets 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. 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" (52-54). 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. In Bhakti poetry, the self is depicted as a barrier to one's spiritual growth. In fact, the saints find in suffering an opportunity to be close to God. Tukaram says it most poignantly:

When He comes
Out of the blue
A meteorite
Shattering your home
God is visiting you

When a catastrophe
Wipes you out
And nothing remains
But God and you
God is visiting you. ("Untitled" *Says Tuka* 109, 1-10)

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 to 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. The suffering that takes a toll on the ego results in the abnegation of self in

Kolatkār's poetry as well. His poetry, occasionally, speaks about the absence of a solid self and the avenues of being such a possibility opens up. The poet who was always reluctant to speak about himself performs a sort of 'vanishing trick' when he does:

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 ("My Name is Arun Kolatkar" 1-8)

After introducing himself, all he has got to say is about a match-box. As he himself said, this is a 'disappearing trick' (Mehrotra, "Death of a Poet" 28). The emptiness that fills one's consciousness upon giving up obsession of having a solid self can turn into an expansion of being. Such a state of being is almost impossible to be conveyed through language, as many mystics down the ages have said. The saint-poets made an attempt to convey it by consciously speaking in an oblique way. Thus, the reading of Bhakti poetry demands a sensitivity which can discern the infinity of emptiness that lies beyond the words. Kolatkar could very well decode the subtle tricks that the saints did with language, which enabled him to translate their poems without losing the essence, and making them 'his own': You are a lot of words if I take them away and replace them with others/ substitute my own what remains of Tuka but the spaces between them ("Making Love to a Poem" 313-317) Experiencing the empty spaces in the words of a mystic, is the direct route to connect with him/her. This connection with the world of mystics does not need the paraphernalia of religion as institution. The organized religion with all its institutional means lose currency for the mystic who has transposed his being to the being of entire universe. In such a state of mind devotion is not an attempt to manipulate God or any such petty and mundane endeavors. It

becomes a complete surrender, leaving the baggage of human desires and pride forever.

Kolatkár is not a mystic who could make the inter-connected web of life into a spiritual experience that shatters all divisions. But as a modern poet who could find glimpses of this experience when firmly situated in the banalities of contemporary life, he offers us the spiritual that is available in the day-to-day reality. Given the ubiquity of discourses which purge out mystery from the daily experiences of modern human being, and that equivocates ethics, Kolatkár gives hope by pitching in for a mysterious perception of life and the ethics of being sensitive towards the 'other'. His poetry while talking about the inner and the outer in the language of mystery gives us an opportunity to reclaim what the saint poets had to offer. His transposition of mystery to a secular framework is relevant for two reasons: one, the experience of Bhakti as in the case of the saint-poets belong to an altogether different realm that the modern day human beings can only be enchanted by but not completely relate to. In Kolatkár, we have a poet who could evoke a sense of the sacred and a feel of mystery in the world that we are most familiar with; and two, to use the language of religion to speak about the mystery of life can send the wrong political message as religion has already become a tool for fundamentalists to push their vicious agendas. Kolatkár's celebration of mystery offers the possibility of connecting with the depths of life and the creative forces of nature even as it offers a powerful resistance to all institutions which colonize the mysterious dimension of life by trying to domesticate it with reductive ideologies.

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