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The Bovine and The Divine: Arun Kolatkar and the Pandu-Poetry and God in a Just-So Universe

SONYA J. NAIR

Abstract: The paper examines the many facets of Arun Kolatkar's spiritual philosophy. The ideas of worship, the world, the powers that run it- make for some of Kolatkar's finest verses. The focus is also on the ways that Kolatkar visualized Time and Poetry as exemplified by his line drawings in The Policeman. Troubadour, ascetic, narrator of uncomfortable truths and histories- Kolatkar is this and much more as he slices through the webs of artifice and banality and brings narratives from the everydays in voices that are usually relegated to the margins. In an increasingly xenophobic world, Kolatkar's brand of sub-cultural bliss can lend some much-needed relief.

Keywords: Arun Kolatkar, The Policeman, Jejuri, Indian Poetry in English, Khandoba

There is a Bombay that lives and breathes, in the memories of certain residents and claimed spaces that spoke many languages, saw and befriended many terrains of lives- and at some unwitting point, became the people themselves and the polished table tops and sepia windows of Irani restaurants. There is considerable nostalgia about the pace of the city that was fast enough to be exciting, but graceful enough to be able to dawdle at the Flora Fountain. It was such and similar spaces, people and times that wrote themselves into the heart of Indian poetry in English during the fifties right down to the early decades of the twenty-first century.

After the rather imitative phase of the early Indian English poetry in English, there was a definite trajectory of thought that tried to fashion an Indian ethos of poetry. Most poets of the developmental phase of Indian poetry in English tried to infuse British poetic structures and conventions with Indian themes, chronicle of lives or geographies. The result was a rather stilted attempt involving language that did not seem comfortable in its own shell. The fifties, however, proved to be a pivotal decade, fueling a search for the many selves of

the poets themselves. There was an intense awareness of their surroundings, the milieu, a sharp eye that peered into the core of an identity, leaving out nothing. The private aspects of thought, of ideas, of interiority itself were discussed without hesitation. The subsequent decades, especially the sixties presented various facets of Indian life in a register that was familiar- and yet unfamiliar. The everydays that the poems of Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, A K Ramanujan discussed were refreshing in that the local was centralized and signaled an unselfconsciousness, ironic tone that was emblematic of a nation that was learning to speak for itself on the world stage. Opines Ranjit Hoskote,

Dom Moraes… belonged, with Nissim Ezekiel, Adil Jussawala and A.K Ramanujan, to the first generation of postcolonial Anglophone poets in India. Their advent, in the literary universe of the 1950s and 1960s, marked a definitive break with the Victorian sentimentality, mellifluous Edwardian cadences and mystical sonority of many Indians who had written English verse before them. these four poets brought an acute and self-critical attentiveness to their art: they knew it to be a contemporary project, an exploration of a complex present rather than an evocation of vanished pasts. As such, they approached their work in the awareness that poetry was a serious career in itself, a sacramental commitment. (ix)

The anxieties of modernity found an expression in the blended tone of Indian poetry English as did the national aspiration towards decolonization.

Families, people, places, customs, festivals, livelihoods, cattle, market places, farewell parties became subject matters for poetry and with these came a vast cultural capital that indicated the need for broader horizons and the urgency to look with greater specificity- the idea of 'Indianness'. Satire found a footing and poems bringing home the peculiarities of Indian English and the notions of progress being linked to the pathways of colonial modernity worked to make Indian poetry in English, truly representative and political. For instance, Ezekiel's The Professor

By God's grace, all my children

Are well settled in life.

One is Sales Manager, One is Bank Manager,

Both have cars. Other also doing well, though not so well.

Every family must have black sheep.

Sarala and Tarala are married,

Their husbands are very nice boys. (Panorama, 141)

Or The Patriot by the same poet:

How one goonda fellow

Threw stone at Indirabehn.

Must be student unrest fellow, I am thinking.

Friends, Romans, Countrymen, I am saying (to myself)

Lend me the ears.

Everything is coming –

Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception.

Be patiently, brothers and sisters.

(Panorama, 89)

The common man and his concerns began to be aligned alongside the verses of personal discoveries. The readings of locales, places of historical importance, personas of yore, concerns of cultural legacies and metaphysical themes began to make their presence felt. A new breed of poets, eager to experiment with form and subject began to write with intensity about personal experiences and fused the same with philosophical or social musings. Their coming of age in a nation that was in transition was reflected in their poems that dealt with identity, the body and a sense of confusion resulting from growing up simultaneously in two worlds. These were the main concerns of poets such as Santan Rodrigues, Melanie Silgardo Saleem Peeradina and Eunice de Souza among others. The agency offered by publishing collectives such as Clearing House, Newground or the

literary magazines of the time such as damn you, created a sense of excitement in terms of providing spaces for young or upcoming poets to publish their work. It also helped create the market needed for indie publishing and groups of poets to get together on ventures that went on to set the tone for the poetic sensibilities of the coming times. Poets such as Ranjit Hoskote, Arundhathi Subramaniam and Menka Shivdasani have credited the poetry circles of Bombay for being the first places where they were heard and, more importantly, where they heard some of the most energetic discussions by established poets.

Meanwhile, there was the vast, uncharted space that was regional poetry- poetry in the vernaculars of India that despite being rich in form and experiment, remained confined to the languages it was written in. What Indian poetry in English once lacked in terms of having a clearly visible critical space and theory of poetics, was found in Bhasha literatures.

Poets such as K. Ayyappa Panikar in Malayalam, M G Adiga, V.K Gokak, Gopala Krishna Adiga in Kannada- who brought about the transformative Navya or modernist movement in Kannada- the Virasam poets in Telugu, B. S Mardhekar in Marathi, Muktibodh and Agyeya in Hindi are torch bearers of a very vibrant poetic scene some of these regions. The nation and its (dis) contents being narrativized often called for reimagining the tried and tired metaphors and symbols that hope, joy and other such phenomena were associated with.

शिशिर का भोर Dawn in winter

उतना-सा प्रकाश Just enough light

कि अंधेरा दिखने लगे, for darkness to show.

उतनी-सी वर्षा Just enough rain

कि सन्नाटा सुनाई दे जाए for silence to sound

उतना-सा दर्द कि याद आये Just enough pain to remember

कि भूल गया हूँ, that I have forgotten,

भूल गया हूँ… I have forgotten…

(Nayi Kavita, 12)

Further expanding this ongoing discourse of 'subalternised' poetry, the critic E V Ramakrishnan points out,

The Dalit writer and the woman writer have understood that mainstream literary language excludes them. they have to purge the existing language of its associations and sub-texts before it can be deployed in their defence. The politics of speech has never been so central to the reading of poetry in Indian languages. What is 'regional' about language becomes a sedimentary layer of cultural memory to be invoked and rediscovered in the struggle against spurious versions of identity fostered from above. The search for a new language and the theme of resistance become inseparable in poets as diverse in themes and styles as Dilip Chitre, K. G Sankara Pillai, Vasant A. Dahake, Sitanshu Yashaschandra and Kedarnath Singh. (xxi)

While the worlds of Indian poetry in English and Bhasha poetry seem like they move in different orbits and share an unequal power relation, they do bring the role of the bi-lingual poet into greater prominence. The bilingual poet, who writes in more than one language is a person who is interestingly placed at the intersections of two distinct or eventually colliding worlds. His modernities are many and his views hybrid. The idea of mutual exclusivity is hard to maintain as the poet brings the semantics of one language into other, invites the spaces, nuances, absences from one tongue to make a home in the other. Often poets translate themselves into these other languages, one of which, more often than not, is- English.

There is also the artist-poet as Amit Chaudhuri points out- one who sees poetry on canvas and sees paintings in verse. There were a good number of such poets, especially out of Bombay, A K Mehrotra, Gieve Patel, Adil Jussawala and Arun Kolatkar, to name a few.

Amit Chaudhuri observes in his Introduction to Jejuri,

That this liaison between a dormant, semi-visible literary culture and a semi-visible tradition of modern art has a parallel in the now publicized liaison between similar worlds in Fifties and Sixties New York is indisputable; so is the fact of the richness of the

interaction…. The literary history that might describe, in serious terms, the significance of what happened in that context in Bombay is still to be written, perhaps because the writer in English was, in India, till Rushdie came along accompanied by Booker-inspired fanfare, a sort of elite pariah, a "missing person," in Jussawala's words, a figure marginal to the larger, and solemn, task of nation building. (xi)

Arun Kolatkar is the most interesting and intriguing of the names mentioned so far in this paper, on account of not just his poetry or his artistic mettle, but also due to the power of his vision and his ability to transcend beyond language and pen the worlds that live in that beyond. His persona of a reclusive, reluctant-to publish poet also added to his value as did his towering presence in Marathi poetry. The fact that he opened a small printing press with his friend so as to not have to deal with publishing contracts, is read as more than mere shyness, rather as a rejection of established norms and indeed of establishment itself. The fondness and dedication of his fellow poets, who celebrated his poetry even after he passed on is testimony to the force of his personality and the stamp his particular brand of poetry left on those who came in contact with it.

Kolatkar is fast emerging as a cult figure in Indian poetry in English as his poems have taken on a fresh relevance in the country that we now occupy. Amidst the rigidity and ossification that comes on due to excessive thrust on religion today, Kolatkar's acid observations on God, Divinity and religion in Jejuri finds a renewed resonance. This collection that was met with considerable excitement and critical acclaim, and won the 1977 Commonwealth Prize for Poetry, was based on a trip taken by Kolatkar to Jejuri- a pilgrimage town near Pune, Maharashtra. Jejuri is like any other temple town in India. It is crowded, all roads and all existences point to the temple, there could be a number of stalls, residential complexes, restaurants, private buses that carry the name of the deity. Touts, guides, holy men, temple officials, priests- all claim to show the way to paradise or to help you gain special blessings.

These and many other sights were what Kolatkar wrote about in Jejuri. He takes one on a literal tour of the town as he starts from the bus ride that takes pilgrims into the town and then he embarks on a journey of the sights and sounds. He doesn't see what the others have come to see- Khandoba- the reigning deity of the town- who is

…is a martial god who is the guardian of the Kunbi group of castes in Western Maharashtra. Beginning as a local deity of the dhangars, the nomadic shepherds, he has become adopted as the incarnation of Lord Shiva and is more widely worshiped now. In

the image on Jejuri, he is pictured in his traditional figuration with a sword in hand and astride his horse. Mhalsa is one of the several wives of the martial god and the one most often pictured in the songs of Khandoba. (Nerlekar, 255)

But more than the shrine or its attendant air of piousness, it is the peripherals that interest Kolatkar. He talks of the journey of a water pipe:

a conduit pipe

runs with the plinth

turns a corner of the house

stops dead in its tracks

shoots straight up

keeps close to the wall

doubles back

twists around

and conies to an abrupt halt

a brass mouse with a broken neck (A Water Pipe, 8)

or an old woman looking to survive

An old woman grabs

hold of your sleeve

and tags along.

She wants a fifty paise coin.

She says she will take you

to the horseshoe shrine.

….

When you hear her say,

'What else can an old woman do

on hills as wretched as these?' (An Old Woman, 15)

In Jejuri, Kolatkar trains an observer's eye upon the life of and in Jejuri- the town. Assuming the mantle of a wandering sage- not a minstrel- for his tone is not so cheerful or light, he speaks aloud of the scenes he witnesses or the people he meets. His angle of vision may vary, at times, he is a witness as it unfolds, at other times, a participant. He might well be an object or a shadow in the corner. Which is why he knows what the door feels as it stands its panels unhinged, ripped from their holds-

Hell with the hinge and damn the jamb.

The door would have walked out

long long ago

if it weren't for

that pair of shorts

left to dry upon its shoulders. (The Door, 9)

The light from this poem spills over from it being the mere idea of the agency of the door standing to mean the main reason most people stay in relationships that they know are no longer viable, the excuses one makes for the powerlessness or the cowardice one shows when faced with big decisions is a very potent theme here. It is this ability to mutate that Laetitia Zecchini referred to as the "transformative traffics between travelling cultures, literatures, forms and idioms, the many resonances of Kolatkar's poetry with world poetry

and of Bombay modernism with other modernisms across the world." (xvi) Along with Dilip Chitre, Kolatkar created geographies of the mind and gave voice to a process that was able to transform the ordinary, the everyday into a deeply spiritual endeavour. What helped rise Kolatkar's poetry above being just plentiful, full- throated spirituality bordering on the banal, was his flexibility with irony, to be able to think up the absurd as an afterthought.

The door was open.

Manohar thought

it was one more temple.

He looked inside.

Wondering

which god he was going to find.

He quickly turned away

when a wide eyed calf

looked back at him.

It isn't another temple,

he said,

it's just a cowshed. (Manohar, 14)

In Jejuri, where everywhere is a temple, Kolatkar brings the haste of the pilgrim, the eye that just doesn't understand what it sees- all into the last line of the poem. The juxtaposition of the bovine and the divine brings this contrast out beautifully.

This position makes it worthwhile to explore the idea of God for Kolatkar. In an interview Kolatkar replies when asked if he believed in God- "I leave the question alone. I don't think I take a position about God one way or the other." (Correspondence, 142)

In fact, this irreverence is a running theme in Kolatkar as he uses irony to great effect to carry out conversations that uproot the great banyan trees of established faith. There is a crushing disdain towards the assuredness of the Divine Right of Gods and an irrepressible urge to question them- or call out their decisions, which when seen through Kolatkar's eyes, seem cruel, unjustifiable and altogether bad ideas. In Sarpa Satra, where he re-reads the sacrificial fire of Janamejaya, his eye spares no one or nothing. In an engaging conversation, he asks Takshak- the snake god who bit Parikshit and set the whole cycle of revenge in motion- where he was when Arjuna and Krishna, on a whim and to test the newly gifted divine weapons, burnt the Khandava forest to ashes, which

…contained five thousand

Different kinds of butterflies alone

And a golden squirrel found nowhere else.

And the fire also decimated the people of the forest

They've gone without a trace.

With their language

that sounded like the burbling of a brook, (CPE, 196)

He writes of the consequences of anger and the futility of revenge in Janamejaya as the protagonist speaks of the manner of the death of his father, the futility of trying to prevent an inevitability. The philosophy of being alive and celebrating the same instead of obsessing over the dynamics of power, the politics of revenge and the need to acquire or possess things that come with a definitive shelf-life is what one generally observes Kolatkar advocating. There is no over-arching narrative of the brave, eternally testosterone charged warrior, seeking to write his legacy in blood. Instead, there are the everyday people- the prostitute, the loutish friend, the street-smart guy offering unsolicited advice and going

about the tasking of living with the same air of busy-ness that any CEO might have. From his Collected Poems in English, (CPE):

Fuck your cap.

If it's gone, it's gone.

You've still got your head on, right?

Hold on to it tight.

(The Wind Song, 242)

Or even his much celebrated Three Cups of Tea-written in the idiom of Bombaiyya Hindi that reads not as beautifully when translated into English- a poem that celebrates the cadences of just living life in the moment. There is a carnivalesque abandon to the lives he presents, the people he populates his world with- their philosophy and point of view making them flaneurs of the post-modern kind. They are people who sing not of the beauty of the sunset or of the rooftops where birds come home to roost in a beloved city, quite the contrary-

Shit city, he thunders;

the lion of Bombay thunders,

Shit City!

(CPE 148, The Shit Sermon)

These truths mixed with a shot of rum (or lack thereof) or the heat and dust of the sprawling metropolis, assume the nature of a spiritual journey, not unlike the one poet undertook as he wrote Jejuri. The troubadour, the wandering poet, the Mast ascetic- these are some of the capes the poet dons with great flair. The nature of his devotion is not quite unlike the Bhakti saints, as he addresses God as his equal, his friend or just another human. The lover connotation or God as king image is, thankfully, missing from his works. Kolatkar's spirituality seems to have been fashioned from the bohemian air that swept through the

world in the Sixties and Seventies- the sort of spirituality that comes from deep within the soul and is answered by the Beatles or Elton John on a hazy evening.

God for Kolatkar is everyone and yet no one. the sheer ordinariness and vulnerability that he attributes to this symbol makes it disarmingly charming and appealing. The all-provider who thinks of everything and yet is made of basalt- one of the most common rocks found in Jejuri.

In The Shit Sermon, he makes the drunk sing his version of thanks to God

God is great, he says.

He has given all his creatures,

great and small,

two holes:

a feedhole and a shithole,

and He will provide.

Usne sabko diyela hai

—khaneko muh,

hugneko gaand.

God is great, he says,

shouting,

I shall not want. (CPE, 146)

And in Jejuri he presents another deity, a “second class god.” (38) He is Yeshwant Rao, in whom the populace has immense faith, unlike Khandoba, he has no extensive mythology attached to him, no brave deeds- meaning he is unclaimed as yet by the co-opting forces

seeking to add more and more deities to the ever-expanding mainstream pantheon. He is an immense god though, people come to him to seek blessings for their children and to be healed. Interestingly, he is made of basalt- which makes him rather ordinary and local to Jejuri. He is a god who doesn't offer salvation, but will set broken bones to heal- and as Kolatkar points out, as he is a god with no arms and feet, he might understand the prayers of the supplicants, a bit better. A god who identifies with his devotees seems to be the sort of God whom Kolatkar imagines presiding over the Universe. A God who is himself at the mercy of the elements, who is perhaps, appointed a God by mere chance or an accident of fate. The sort of God that a prostitute takes a picture with, standing between him and his wife. The God who is fondly called Vitthoo by his consort Rakhmabai, and a devotee and who, knowing that his wife's peripheral vision is bad, goes wandering from her side instead of being in the temple or worse still, was never even there.

These gods walk in and out of Kolatkar's verses, speaking in the first person or wondering at the genesis of their divinity. But it is in his brilliant work of non-verbal poetry- a series of line drawings called The Policeman that Kolatkar narrates an endearing vision of the chaos that reigns in the name of order in this world and the way that his version of God runs about trying to make sense of it all. The figure of the police constable is one of the most discussed images in Marathi culture. He is not your usual station in-charge or the man who bashes up goons or kills smugglers in 'encounters'. He is not the saviour who angrily stands up to his superiors and politicians and delivers dialogues that earn whistles from the fifty rupee- ticket crowd in the cinema halls. He is the Pandu- the constable- found at traffic signals, at railway stations, at entrances to temples, always directing traffic or asking people to get a move on. The Pandu, along with the yellow and black taxis of Bombay remain one of the city's most identifiable symbols.

Drawn in 1969, the original sketches are now lost and the current copies of the book in circulation are from one of the first versions of the book. The cover of the book is indicative of what is to come as it shows the figure of the God/ Policeman nailed to a cross and accompanied by the various directions he could have taken as an alternative. Designed by Kolatkar himself, the cover serves as a takeoff point for the choices that God himself seems to make in the guise of granting free will to the world. The complete title of the work is, The Policeman: A Wordless Play in Thirteen Scenes. Zecchini describes the opening sequence of the book thus:

The Policeman: A Wordless Play in Thirteen Scenes, which is the only book of the poet's graphic work published to date, encapsulates the spirit of Kolatkar's world, which

constantly reforms and renews itself, gesture after gesture, line after line, image after image. It is composed of a series of line drawings where the poet's sense of humour, tenderness, playful irreverence and extraordinary visual imagination are given free rein. It also opens on a remarkable self-portrait of the poet, although the clean-cut mouth and drooping mustache are the only traits immediately discernible. The mouth is closed on a cigarette, and the smoke curling up from the cigarette outlines the contours of a nose, an eye, the hint of a forehead and an elongated eyebrow. It is a portrait between the lines, as it were, the moving, malleable, provisional portrait of an artist who slipped through the hands of fixed identities and who treasured impermanence. (xvii)

In the thirteen segments that Kolatkar sketches, one can discern the patterns of life of a God who is the eternal traffic policeman situated in an open field, arms windmilling to direct the course of time, to send along snakes and snails, to let bees build a hive in the crook of an outstretched arm. The Policeman is an entity who seems to trying to cope on the best of days. And on the bad days, he runs away, only to come back to his pedestal almost immediately. In this seemingly lonely and utterly wordless universe that he occupies, his friends are the various creatures of Nature- he dances in ecstasy, grabbing a half moon, stands upside down on his pedestal- a mad God whose only nemesis is the Lightning. The Lightning approaches him at various times, at interludes, roaring, bringing rain, depriving him of his umbrella- making him install a badly made stone God in his place- so as to fool the Lightning. The next panel shows the lightning pointed dangerously at the exposed genitals of the now naked God. He then resumes his post, fully clothed, in a swiftly intensifying downpour- the idea of the supreme being and His will prevailing- all smashed to smithereens. Arun Khopkar discusses this supreme being who straddles cultures, belief systems and geographies:

The Policeman is Arun's dance-drama in thirteen scenes. Its hero is the dancing cop-God and its heroine is Arun's dancing line, Maya. She shifts the scenes in time, covering the cycle of days and seasons. We go into mythical times, with the cop-God dancing on the hood of the multi-headed serpent holding a prize fish in his raised hand. We see our ever-vigilant hero in prehistoric times, conducting the traffic, making a dinosaur wait for millennia for his hand to come down, to be finally carried as a fossil by a crane…. We are privileged to see a mermaid-Madonna- Yashoda nurse the cop-God, secure in the womb of a whale. (124)

The clarity of faith that shines through these panels conveys Kolatkar's deep and abiding spirituality. It is more of a sense of reassurance that the noise and thunder and confusion

on earth is not entirely ignored, it is possibly the result of a bumbling God who is keeping watch- the most important part of the idea being that of a God who knows and understands.

The idea of time is of significant interest in the book, as it is presented as an entity that is circular, which the God then makes leap through a hoop, in the process creating infinite channels of TIME which is then presented in the panel in the font of the TIME Magazine with the Policeman featuring on the cover. This tongue-in-cheek illustration is characterized as God's reply to the 1966 April issue of TIME magazine's cover page that carried no photo- only the caption, Is God Dead? At a time when the presence of a white, male, monolithic God was being challenged by the perception of a gentle, spiritual and sentient energy, Kolatkar's presentation is in many ways, an affirmation of this idea, as well a rebuttal to the question by TIME. It also indicated the multiple interpretations of the idea of death or being dead- that through the mention of his death, God remains alive. The philosophical implications of that illustration and its original in TIME were quite symptomatic of that age of skepticism and urgent calls for reorienting the imagination to think of a new sort of God. Like one who goes about his work as though directing traffic perhaps.

The last two segments of the book are especially relevant- the first is where the sun is shining overhead and the shadow of the policeman is to his left. He moves the shadow to his right, while the sun still remains overhead. In the last panel of the narrative, the sun is overhead, the shadow is still to the right, the policeman, however, is gone. We are to understand that it is his shadow that creates night on earth. Power conveyed very subtly.

The last segment features the return of the lightning, which grows more ominous and dragon-like with every panel, until the policeman opens his mouth and yells at the lightning which then is reduced to a mere weakened presence.

These panels convey the immenseness of the God of Kolatkar's imagination- a God who keeps his power for when it matters, who is like the common man, going about his business of living, encountering difficulties, finding his way out of them through that most Indian of methods, the jugaad, until one day, when the occasion demands it, he steps into the role of God and restores peace.

It makes one wonder if this God is at all divine or is it just the tolerance and sense of control that rests within each one of us that makes us want to protect our worlds that makes Gods

of us all. It contextualizes Vitthoo (Vithala), Rakhmabai, Yeshwant Rao and the drunk delivering the Shit Sermon.

The Policeman is an extraordinary work of poetry, though it does not have a single line of written poetry in it. But that is what the work stands for. A radical re-imagination of what constitutes God, poetry and the world as we imagine it. The idea being that weighty words such fate, destiny, karma be consigned to flames and instead, the focus be placed on living with the beautiful knowledge that the world is a very transient place, occupied by leaves, ants, whales and bees – who have every right to live alongside us and that in this ephemeral world where one day, Gods on pedestals are garlanded, while on other days, they stand stark naked as their clothes are strung out to dry, there is a traffic of organisms, times, seasons and snails. And humans, who consider themselves the most important beings on the planet, are not even featured in a book that is synonymous with the Universe. So, we must learn to not attach so much importance to our lives that we spend on this earth as non-entities. The biggest lesson of it all is that this entire world, God, traffic- everything could just the smoke induced fantasy of a man with a droopy moustache smoking a cigarette who appears on the first page.

God?

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