

From Oral Tradition to English Verse: Folklore and Cultural Assimilation in Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*

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Arun Kolatkar and the Postcolonial Poetic Turn

Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004) is a very important poet in India after independence. He wrote well in both Marathi, his native language, and English literature. His training as a graphic artist strongly influenced his poetry, making his style very visual and fragmented. This visual approach turns his poems into sharp, economical “sketches” of what he sees, using concrete details like “cracked stone, monkey droppings, dusty stairs” to show the physical world.

The collection *Jejuri* (1976) made Kolatkar widely famous, winning the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1977. The poem sequence, made up of thirty-one parts, sparked much discussion because it uses a highly skeptical and rational viewpoint when looking at religious experience.

Contextualizing Jejuri: Pilgrimage and Ambivalence

Jejuri tells the story of an educated, doubting traveler, often called Manohar, visiting the old pilgrimage site in Maharashtra dedicated to the folk god Khandoba. The setting itself is based on a “conflict” between the ancient stories and “legendary associations of the place and the god and the socio-cultural reality of the place”. This clash reflects the modern Indian experience: a rational observer encountering persistent myth among physical ruin.

Kolatkar’s tone throughout *Jejuri* is one of “empathetic skepticism”. The narrator is neither a disbelieving outsider nor a purely devout insider, but someone “hovering over boundary lines”. He questions religious practices and the money-making side of faith, yet he also shows deep

sensitivity to the human need for belief and ritual. This mixed feeling challenges the simple idea of faith versus doubt, allowing for a deep critique that remains rooted in the local Marathi culture.

Jejuri carries out a vital act of **cultural assimilation and linguistic translation**: it takes the raw, mixed, and physical tradition of Marathi folklore and converts it into a modern, fragmented English style. This process uses the colonial language (English) to create a local critique, succeeding in finding the sacred not in official myth, but in the ruins, the marginalized people, and the physical reality of Western India. The poem thus shows a crucial moment where postcolonial literature takes in local tradition through a non-traditional language.

Folklore and Oral Traditions in Western India

The Syncretic Cult of Khandoba

The main god of the Jejuri pilgrimage is Khandoba, also called Martanda Bhairava. He is the most popular *Kuladevata* (family deity) in Maharashtra, worshiped by many different groups of people, including farming, shepherd, warrior, and some priestly castes. Khandoba is a mix of many gods, including Shiva, Bhairava, Surya, and Kartikeya. His main stories, found in texts like the

Malhari Mahatmya and spread through popular folk songs, are about his fight with the demons Mani and Malla and his marriages to Mhalsa and Banai. This historical blending establishes Jejuri as a place that is naturally fluid. Khandoba's easy ability to accept diverse, sometimes conflicting, divine characteristics and community groups provides a foundation for Kolatkar's own poetic mixing of cultures.

Assimilation via Syncretism: The Muslim Connection

The cult of Khandoba provides a historical example of cultural assimilation that shapes Kolatkar's view. Khandoba is linked with Hindu and Jain traditions, and, importantly, he accepts Muslim devotees, who worship him as Ajmat Khan or Mallu Khan. Stories suggest this blending began from historical events, such as the myth that the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb was driven out by Khandoba's powers.

This deep mixing of different elements, which is part of the religious structure itself, shows that the cultural reality of Western India is not a 'pure' indigenous identity. While some critics ask for a pristine, essential local representation, Khandoba's long history of accepting non-Hindu elements challenges this demand. The fluidity of the god mirrors Kolatkar's own choice to write in two languages. His decision to use English to represent this dynamic, mixed deity simply echoes the deity's own openness to cultural blending across time and society.

Embodied Tradition: The Vaghya and the Murli

The most important people who carry the Jejuri oral tradition are the Vaghya (male devotee) and the Murli (female devotee). They are performers from nomadic or "lower" caste groups who keep the cult's legends alive through constant performance. They perform

Jagran (singing, dancing, and acting out stories) on special occasions, passing on the complex tales of Khandoba to common people using local languages. The Vaghya plays the *Dimdi* (a local drum), while the Murli plays the *Ghati* (a small set of bells) .

These traditions are the raw, local, and often financially vulnerable link to the god, standing in contrast to the formal, written Sanskrit texts of elite religion. Kolatkar's inclusion of "A Song for a Vaghya" and "A Song for a Murli" directly translates these local, oral performances into the English text, making the voices of the marginalized visible. These poems capture the rawness and immediacy that can be lost in formal narratives.

Kolatkar's Poetic Translation of Oral Culture

Modernism, Fragmentation, and the Sketch

Kolatkar translates oral culture through his use of modernist art techniques. His training in graphic arts leads to a style based on "fragments of perception". He uses short lines and sudden shifts, breaking down the long, continuous stories typical of oral traditions and myths, such as the *Malhari Mahatmya*. The poem's structure mirrors

the physical ruin of Jejuri, using fragmentation to show the “barrenness of the physical landscape” while focusing on “the emptiness or ambiguity of spiritual experience.”

The Assimilation of Language: Marathi Idiom in English Syntax

Kolatkár wrote in both Marathi and English, which uniquely allows him to stand between global literary modernism and regional tradition. The poet avoids making Indian culture seem exotic to Western readers. Instead, he makes “Indian realities to reshape English expression”. His English is not formal or academic, but a colloquial, practical idiom, reflecting a true “Indian English”. This mixing of languages captures the real, bilingual sensibility of the modern Indian citizen.

For example, the language in “A Low Temple” captures the blending of English sentence structure with Marathi cultural idioms:

you know then that there is no god, but stone and the stone’s a foot thick. (Kolatkár 17)

The simple, bare wording hides a complex cultural meeting, using the English language (inherited from colonization) to express a deep, local disillusionment or material reality.

Translating the Vaghya’s Visceral Faith

The most direct example of poetic assimilation happens in “A Song for a Vaghya,” where the Vaghya’s low-caste, elemental spirituality is put into clear English verse. The Vaghya’s life is brutally tied to survival, linking devotion directly to economic need:

I killed my mother for her skin. I must say it didn’t take much to make this pouch I keep turmeric in.” (Kolatkár 29)

This translation presents the spiritual truth of the oral tradition not as abstract thinking, but as raw, sensory, and biological experience. The Vaghya’s spiritual identity is summarized in a “one word song” (Kolatkár 30), showing ultimate poetic minimalism. His relationship with the god

Khandoba is defined by both fear and necessary provision:

God is the word and I know it backwards.
I know it as fangs inside my flanks.
But I also know it as a lamb between my teeth,
as a taste of blood upon my tongue. (Kolatkár 30)

This use of English modernism becomes a way to express a marginalized spirituality, giving unexpected importance to a tradition often left out of mainstream stories.

Cross-Cultural Encounters and Assimilation

The Collision of Faith and Skepticism

The design of *Jejuri* is driven by the constant clash between old traditional faith and the observer's strong modern doubt. This conflict forces a blending of ancient myths with rational, objective reality. The observer's role is constantly to reduce the sacred to the everyday.

A clear example of this reduction happens when the traveler mistakes a "cowshed" for "one more temple," only to be confronted by the simple reality of farm life when a

Wide eyed calf looked back at him. "He realizes,
"It isn't another temple,
he said,
it's just a cowshed. (Kolatkár 16)

Yet, when objective reality challenges myth, the power of fixed belief often wins. In "A Low Temple," the observer notes that the priest's "eight arm goddess" clearly has eighteen arms. When the narrator points out the fact ("You can count. But she has eighteen, you protest"), the priest ignores the evidence: "All the same she is still an eight arm goddess to the priest" (Kolatkár 13). This shows the firmness of ritualistic belief, where internal faith is stronger than outside, verifiable facts.

Chaitanya's Radical Materialism

The figure of Chaitanya, the Bhakti saint, appears several times, offering a different kind of spiritual story that goes beyond formal ritual. His actions show the most extreme form of spiritual assimilation: turning the divine representation back into its material origins. In one sequence, he is quoted:

“sweet at grapes are the stone of jejuri,” followed by the action:

“he popped a stone in hitmouth and spat out gods.” (Kolatkar 19)

This strong image suggests that divinity is not in the established god or the manufactured idol, but in the raw, physical material of the world itself. By symbolically ‘spitting out’ the deities, Chaitanya implies that the deepest spiritual truth exists outside the structured forms of worship. This idea connects the spiritual freedom of the Bhakti tradition with a core modern focus on material reality. It suggests that if the difference between “god and stone” is “very thin” (Kolatkar 24), then true faith means accepting the stone itself.

The Assimilation of the Marginalized God (Yeshwant Rao)

The poem finishes its exploration of assimilation by highlighting the figure of Yeshwant Rao. He is called a “second class god” (Kolatkar 45), a formless “mass of basalt” located physically outside the main temple, placed “among the tradesmen and the lepers”. He is intentionally non-dramatic and imperfect, lacking “an arm, a leg or even a single head” (Kolatkar, 46).

The narrator favors this deity, preferring him over the powerful gods “who soak you for your gold” or are “either too symmetrical or too theatrical”. Yeshwant Rao symbolizes the assimilation of suffering, imperfection, and being marginalized into the divine. Because he is broken, overlooked, and formless, “he happens to understand you a little better” (Kolatkar, 46). The true spiritual lesson of *ejuri* is this moral assimilation, which suggests that real divinity is found not in power

and hierarchy, but in empathy with those on the edge. This ethical view is a clear rejection of the commercial, hierarchical pilgrimage system seen throughout the town.

Representation of Western India in *Jejuri*

The Topography of Ruin and Decadence

Kolatkár shows the landscape of Western India not as a beautiful, romantic place, but as a hard place full of decay and neglect. The environment is defined by “wretched hills” (Kolatkár 17) and “sand blasted shoulders, bladed with shale” (Kolatkár 24). The infrastructure reflects historical failure; the “great reservoir the Peshwas built” contains “nothing in it. Except a hundred years of silt” (Kolatkár 36).

This portrayal focuses on human weakness and material reality. For instance, the temple cupboard is described as holding “shelf upon shelf of gold gods in tidy rows,” but these gods are viewed through broken glass covered with strips of “stock exchange quotations” (Kolatkár 44). This sharp contrast emphasizes how commercial interests and material concerns have totally assimilated the sacred space, highlighting the economic reality of the pilgrimage site.

Functional Sanctity

The poem “Heart of Ruin” clearly shows the blending of the ordinary into the sacred space. When the temple roof falls on Maruti’s head, the resulting ruin becomes the favored shelter of local life:

A mongrel bitch has found a place,
for herself and her puppies
in the heart of the ruin. (Kolatkár 8)

The poem makes an important point, stating that the ruined structure is “No more a place of worship this place is nothing less than the house of god” (Kolatkár 8). This change suggests that true sacredness is not in formal religious service (worship), but in the space’s material reality (house of God). By returning to its broken, functional state, the site

assimilates the ordinary, providing shelter for the marginalized (the animals) and challenging idealized ideas of India as a land of perfect spirituality.

Assimilating Modernity: The Railway Station Epilogue

The poetic journey ends at the railway station, where the ancient, rural landscape meets the structured, rational reality of industrial modernity. This final location offers the most striking example of mutual cultural assimilation.

The railway timetable, a secular symbol of rational, modern time, is taken in and reinterpreted through indigenous theological logic. The two-headed station master, a strange figure, explains this. He calls all later timetables “apocryphal,” but he reads the first, original timetable with such freedom that he declares all timetables, past and future, to be “simultaneously valid” because they were “inherent in the one printed when the track was laid” (Kolatkar 52).

This absurd statement applies a traditional, pre-modern, cyclical belief of pre-ordainment to a rigid, modern technological structure. The Station Master’s oddity shows how traditional thought resists being simply replaced by modernity; instead, it is assimilated and redefined to maintain continuity, proving that even the structures of colonial legacy are subjected to local myth-making.

Conclusion

Arun Kolatkar’s *Jejuri* is an essential work that shows how cultures blend in postcolonial literature. It successfully translates the mixed, local oral tradition of Khandoba into sharp, critical, but caring English poetry in a modern style. Kolatkar effectively used English, a language often linked to colonial disruption, not to make Indian forms seem exotic or perfect, but to provide a radical, grounded critique of local problems and commercialized faith.

The assimilation process in *Jejuri* finally resolves the conflict between doubt and faith by insisting that true spirituality is based on material

reality and human empathy. This is confirmed by the acceptance of the broken, overlooked God Yeshwant Rao, the elevation of the Vaghya's raw survival story, and the recognition of ruin as a functional, sacred space. Through mixing languages and fragmenting aesthetics, Kolatkar affirms a strong, diverse Indian spirituality that is found in the marginal and the broken things, confirming his work as an excellent example of postcolonial poetry engaging with folklore.

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