Arun Kolatkar’s “The Bus”: A Skeptic Journey Toward Spiritual Nothingness

Arunava Roy
Research Scholar
Rabindra Bharati University Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Abstract:
One of the leading literary voices of his generation Arun Kolatkar in his surrealistic poem The Bus, the opening poem of his magnum opus poetry collection Jejuri depicts a sojourn strenuous journey towards Jejuri a holy site renowned for the pervading Deity Khandoba the incarnation of Lord Shiva. The poem displays the oscillation between modernity and tradition the rational poet-persona of scientific sensibility scorns the religious practices as nothingness whereas the dogmatic old man finds solace in spiritual devotion and rituals following ancestral rites. The poet speakers split consciousness leads him to skepticism and quest for absolute truth.

Keywords: Surrealistic, barrenness, beliefs, rituals, conflict, Skeptic.

Introduction:
In the literary expanse of Indian English poetry, Arun Kolatkar is one of the leading popular poets in the post-colonial India. He appeals the readers’ attraction through his lucid simple language expressing underlying humour of daily life. His literary ouevre took a percussive role in elevating Indian English poetry to its own distinctive position. Coming out from the cocoon of western literary influence, Kolatkar voices the ingenuity of Indianness from his poetic macro-cosmic view. Kolatkar’s magnum opus “Jejuri” a 31-poetry collection blended with satirical Skepticism towards pilgrimage. Jejuri is a site of pilgrimage, near about 50 km away from Pune, Maharashtra. This municipal town is famous for the revered temple of Lord Khandoba, also known as Mhalsakant or Malhari Martand or Mylaralinga. Lord Khandoba, the human incarnation of God Shiva is the ancestral tutelary deity of nomadic Dhangar tribe of the Maharashtra.

The Khandoba Temple is on the hill. Traversing 200 steps, one can take a glance of picturesque Jejuri town. The temple is structured upon Hemad Panthi architecture. In the inner sanctum, there is the glorious idol of Lord Khandoba mounted on a horse in warrior form. Devotees worship the God with turmeric and bel-fruit leaves and offer naivedhya. According to the legend, two destructive demonic brothers, Mani and Malla became powerful for Lord Brahma’s boon. Inflicted by the atrocious demonic torture, human beings started pray to Lord Shiva. The prayer led Shiva to incarnate himself as Khandoba and killed the demons. To appease the Lord Khandoba, people started different spiritual rites and offerings. Animal sacrifice and the offerings of the god’s blessed child are still prevalent. But Arun Kolatkar has not tribute to Lord Khandoba in his poetry collection, rather than he upheld cynical attitude towards traditional religiosity moulded in spiritual nothingness. He did not oppose regarding idolatry but expressed an utter disbelief and unflinching denial
towards pilgrimage. As Pankaj Mishra said: “Arun Kolatkar was the greatest Indian poet of his generation and Jejuri, with its linguistic inventiveness and intellectual daring, was his masterwork.” In this paper, I shall analyze the opening poem of the collection- ‘The Bus’ which has set the thematic tone of the poetry-collection- “Jejuri”

Kolatkar’s poetry “Jejuri” is a simulacrum of religious satire. Rationalist Kolatkar believed in the spirituality of Religion but did not justify the extravaganza of rituals and rites. As Chaucer in his “The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales” upholds the disintegration and spiritual vacuum, similarly Kolatkar penned a Skeptic attitude over religious credibility leading to spiritual nothingness. M. Satyanarayana, one of the greatest Indian Critic refers it as- “Kolatkar’s Wasteland”. The poet’s daring jugglery of ironic treatment exposes the pilgrims’ dogmatism and bigotry to an utmost extent. To justify the relevance of ancestral pilgrimage of Khandoba, the poet speaker decides to visit Khando-bachi Jejuri.

In the opening poem “The Bus”, the Poet persona exploits the traditional pilgrimage a sojourn, strenuous journey towards Jejuri Temple through Manohar, a person with scientific sensibility and rational outlook. We get an absurd perception of the whole pilgrimage through Skeptical lens. Jejuri is the epitome of miniature India. The religious practices and the haunting of pilgrims is not confined only in Jejuri but all over Indian religious places. The poem starts abruptly; cramped with significant imagery. A state-transport Bus bound to Jejuri sets off its journey. The windows of the bus are “buttoned down” with the tarpaulin. In deeper connotation, the tarpaulin not only screen off the windows of the bus but also insulate the rational progression of the pilgrims. The cold wind’s slapping of the tarpaulin insinuates the elbow of fellow pilgrims: “A Cold wind keeps whipping and slapping a corner of the tarpaulin at your elbow.”

The fragile condition of the Bus and the “roaring roads” (transferred epithet) are symbolic. The bad condition of the bus symbolizes the meaninglessness and irrelevance of the journey. Manohar tries to seek out the day break in the lights spilled out of the bus, sunrays may denote rationality which is susceptible to change the religious mind set of the pilgrims. But in another aspect, the bus is a symbol of a camera (Latin word camera obscura) meaning dark chamber. The bigoted pilgrims seek that sunray as sparkle of celestial gleams.

“You look down the roaring roads
You search for signs of daybreak in
What little light spill out of the bus”

The headlight of the bus which lightens the bumpy track is symbolic of the spiritual consolation through religious experiences. In the paired glasses of an old pilgrims, Manohar sees his “own divided face.” The “divided face” refers the conflict between his religious self-yearning to visit ancestral devotional spot and his Skeptic self, questioning its rational relevance.

“Your own divided face in a pair of glasses on an old man’s nose
Is all the countryside you get to see”
Here the old man is the embodiment of emblematic spiritual hollowness and rigid traditionalism. The fellow pilgrim gets a sensation of movement “towards a destination.” The spectacled old man bears a vermilion mark on his forehead it indicates his high-caste lineage. The poet-speaker throws a sarcastic scathing attract claiming his destination “just beyond the caste mark beyond his eyebrows”. The morning sun peeps through “an eyelet” of the tarpaulin. The sunlight scorns the “old man’s glasses” revealing his dogmatic identity. The sliced ‘sun-beam’ rests upon the driver’s right side of forehead. “The bus seems to change direction” may refer their final turn towards destination. In my opinion, as the sunbeam, symbolic of rational enlightenment manifests the driver’s modern consciousness. As the strenuous journey gets over, the poet-speaker feels a strange self-estrangement. The Skeptic poet’s rational-self neither associates with him reflecting the aimlessness of journey nor joins with the old man arguing his religious bigotry.

“At the end of bumpy ride
With your own face on either side
When you get off the bus”.

The poet’s modern self is repulsive of the old man’s dogmatic self. The last line of the poem “you don’t step inside the old man’s head” connotes a deeper symbolic meaning. The poet-speaker finds nothing in God’s holy place as he believes in God’s existence in the inner sanctum of the soul not in purposeless rites, religious practices which the old man inherits. The poet feels alienated. The poet is blatantly non-involved and impervious to such rigid devotion, which brings multitudes of devotees through-out the whole year. The religious self of the poet-persona knows only proper internal adoration to God, not the blind faith upon religious rites. In this context, we can recall the poetic use of Nassim Ezekiel’s poem “Enterprise” “Home is where we have to gather grace.”

Conclusion:
The poet person is fully conscious about his psychological conflict his alienation from such superstition, religious aloofness but his spiritual conscience leads him toward Skepticism and quest for absolute truth. For the essence of the poem is a spiritual quest, the effort to find the divine trace in a degenerate world.

References: