

**RELIGIOUS EXPEDITION WITH SECULAR UNDERTONES:  
A MATERIALIST CRITIQUE OF PILGRIMAGE IN  
INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH**

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**Abstract**

Pilgrimage or visit to a holy place has been an interesting but debatable topic in Indian English poetry. Though Pilgrimage is generally associated with faith in God and religion, but poetry written on this topic has revealed contradictory ideas. Critics have divergent views about the poet's reasons behind writing poetry on pilgrimage. It is a paradox that poets undertaking religious journeys either propagate secular feelings or they mock the prevailing ideas associated with the site. Through this research paper, attempts have been made to understand that whether it is a matter of mockery or the poet wants to reveal some hidden truth through his critical poetry. The present paper tries to focus on poetry written on or during a pilgrimage and have propagated sceptic ideas; the ideas which are based upon personal experience during a religious journey, but have generated universal philosophical concerns.

Pilgrimage has always been considered as a refuge into the other world. Apart from being a strenuous journey to a holy place, pilgrimage also acts as a shelter to the tired mind against the harsh heat of life. Being away from the hustle and bustle of life, the pilgrim affords to contemplate on some serious issues like spirituality, religion, humanity, idealism and the goal of life. But sometimes it transports one to the world which is away from the mainstream pattern of thinking and believing. It also provides time and space to the soul to ponder over life and to reason the ways of life. Either the pilgrim accepts everything as an unquestioning faith or he looks at everything with suspicion; questioning the very sanctity of the belief system. Sometimes it leads the pilgrim to question the set norms by observing life as an onlooker. The pilgrim also tries to understand the much misunderstood universal issue of the existence of God in various forms. This questioning leads to irony and sarcasm, and contradiction with the set norms of belief.

If the pilgrim happens to have a poetic bent of mind, what his intellect perceives and the conclusion it comes to, is often manifested through poetry. There has been a long association of poetry and pilgrimage. Sometimes, the pilgrimage offers ethereal experience, and sometimes it becomes an ironical encounter of the pilgrim with contradictions and superstitions which are hard to accept to a soul that reasons. This makes the poet pilgrim sceptic of the set belief system and this scepticism comes to the forefront through slant and oblique references in his poetry.

Poetry has been written on or during pilgrimage across the world. Particularly, in India there has been a long tradition of undertaking pilgrimage, either to a distant place or to a nearby place of worship. Pilgrimage has also captured the attention of Indian poets and many poets have written poetry based upon their experiences during the journey. This paper tries to examine the way pilgrimage and visit to a holy place have been treated in Indian poetry in English.

It is interesting to note that ironical and unexpected ideas have been propagated by the poets or their narrators undertaking pilgrimage in the subsequent poetry that followed their journey. They no longer believe in the belief system associated with the holy place. Rather they see the other side and come out with their own truth; truth which is based upon their experience and reason. Though their experience is personal but the conclusion they arrive at is more universal. Moreover, the journey they undertook was religious but the perception they have gained is secular. Here, an attempt has been made to highlight this irony and to bring to the forefront the deep universal philosophical concerns of the poet that find voice through his mockery of the journey he undertakes.

It is a paradox too, that out of a religious act, comes out an experience which is secular, scientific and humanistic. As if the pilgrim is seeking spiritual enlightenment through pilgrimage but reaching somewhere else finding something else. These incongruous and ironical feelings and perceptions have been diligently expressed in Indian poetry in English. One such example is Nissim Ezekiel's poem "Enterprise" published in 1960 in *The Unfinished Man*. In this poem the poet undertakes a journey with a group of people with enthusiasm and excitement and with the hope that the journey will enrich them spiritually. They will be able to enlighten themselves and lighten the burden of anxiety and tension of their lives: "It all started as a pilgrimage / Exalting minds and making all / The burden light" (1-3). But as the journey progressed, they differences of opinion developed among the pilgrims and left the group divided into groups. It is amusing to note that the reason behind the breaking of the group was very trivial. Soon the group that began the journey with hope became a crowd with no unity and consensus:

But when the differences arose  
 On how to cross a desert patch,  
 We lost a friend. . . . .  
 Another phase was reached when we  
 Were twice attacked, and lost our way.  
 A section claimed its liberty  
 To leave the group (11-13, 16-20)

The group that started the journey with the hope of gaining something rewarding, got shattered into small groups and turned into an aimless and directionless crowd. Here a pilgrimage begins with a hope to lighten the burden; to seek solutions, but ends with lots of new problems. It is also comical that the pilgrim here cannot understand and listen to his heart and conscience, and cares more for minor things like soap.

A struggling crowd of little hope,  
 Ignoring what the thunder meant,

Deprived of common needs like soap  
 Some were broken, some were merely bent. (22-25)

Ezekiel’s “Enterprise” also reveals the reality of human life. It is symbolic of the journey of life where it is most important to make good relations and to learn the art of keeping those relations. A pilgrimage which is supposed to be a religious journey becomes a secular illustration of the truth of life. As Manavar opines “There is synthesis of the secular and the religious. His address to God is not a direct one”(261).

“When, finally, we reached the place  
 We hardly knew why we were there.  
 The trip had darkened every face,  
 Our deeds were neither great nor rare.  
 Home is where we have to gather grace. (26-30)

The journey does not bring them any achievement or a sense of satisfaction; rather they feel frustrated, physically tired, irresolute and indecisive. They now question their undertaking or the enterprise they started, now they find it futile and meaningless. It is humorous that in the end the pilgrims feel that they would be better if stayed back home instead of undertaking a dangerous and futile journey or ‘enterprise’.

It is also contradictory and hilarious that the “burdens light” in the first stanza becomes “broken and bent down” in the last stanza. “Thunder” means conscience, which is amusingly also missing, and the journey which started as a group of hopeful pilgrims, ended as a crowd with no hope. The exposition of pilgrimage in the poem does not celebrate religion and faith in God; the poem is largely a humorous bundle of complaints about the pilgrimage which is painful, tedious and less comfortable.

This journey reminds us of T. S. Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi” (1927) to Palestine to witness by honouring the newborn Christ. The journey was undertaken in the hope that it would create history. But, as it was undertaken during harsh and hostile weather, the pilgrim does not feel rewarded and complain about the lack of comfort and non-cooperation of the local people.

There were time we regretted  
 The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
 And the silken girls bringing sherbet  
 Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
 And running away, and wanting their liquor and women.  
 And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelter,  
 And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
 And the villages dirty, and charging high prices  
 With the voices singing in our ears, saying,  
 That this was all folly. (8-20, Journey of the Magi By T. S. Eliot)

These accounts of painful, less comfortable and not-so-rewarding pilgrimages reminds us of yet another poem based on a pilgrimage undertaken by the poet. The poem is Arun Kolatkar’s *Jejuri* (1976). This is a long poem or a sequence of many short poems, accounting the poet’s experience during his visit to a sacred place Jejuri. Amit Chaudhary in his introduction to the poem states:

. . . the poem was resistant to being pigeon-holed into quasi-religious categories; in response to an interview he had said “I leave the question alone. I don’t think I have to take a position about God one way or the other.” This comfort with the either/or lies at the heart of the poem. (xvii)

The poem manifests the poet's secular concerns and sceptic feelings which storm his mind during his journey to a place of religious significance Jejuri. The account starts with a short poem "The Bus. The bus by the poet undertakes his pilgrimage catches his attention more than the excitement of the visit: "The tarpaulin flaps are buttoned down / on the windows of the state transport bus / all the way up to Jejuri" (1-3). The dilapidated condition of the bus and "tarpaulin flaps" used to pall the windows grab his attention so much that the poem starts with a special mention of the same.

In "The Priest" Kolatkar describes the priest of the temple who is anxiously waiting for the bus. As his livelihood depends upon the visitors and their faith, he comes out of the temple to examine whether "the bus" had arrived. Through the description of the greedy priest who is eating betel nut instead of chanting mantra, the poet ridicules how the religious places have become a source to plunder the money of innocent people.

The bit of betel nut  
 turning over and over on his tongue  
 is a mantra.

.....  
 The bus goes round in a circle.  
 Stops inside the bus station and stands  
 purring softly in front of the priest.  
 A catgrin on its face  
 and a live, ready to eat pilgrim  
 held between its teeth. (16-18, 28-33)

"Purring softly in front of the bus station" is a humorous expression and adds richness to the imagery. All through his pilgrimage Kolatkar never seems to express faith in the legends associated to Jejuri. He rather mocks the legends by adopting a secular and scientific approach.

In "A Scratch" Kolatkar looks at every minute detail with a secular eye and comments: "Scratch a rock / and a legend springs" (23-24). He does not hesitate to call God a crop. He says that God is the only crop at Jejuri and that is being harvested in all the seasons of the year. Nowhere does he use a capital 'G' for referring to God:

there is no crop  
 other than god  
 and god is harvested here  
 around the year. (9-12)

Instead of acknowledging the sanctity of the place he pays more attention to minor things (which are a common sight at most of the pilgrim sites) like "butterfly, "dog", "the temple rat", "the old woman" etc. It is an eccentric point to which juxtaposes God with dog: "God is the word / I know backwards" (44-45).

In another poem named "Hills" he is so indifferent and rude to the general faith in the legends linked to the place and the nearby hills, that goes on repeating "hills and demons" in all the seven stanzas of the poem. This repetition indicates at his irreverence and scepticism. Bruce King is of the opinion that "Kolatkar is a master of the congruous and the absurd". In "The Door step" he has an eye for realistic detail and mentions seeing under-pants drying on a temple door, a calf in what might be a temple or cowshed" (491 King). The reiteration of "hills and demons" is the result of a legend he hears from the priest's son in "The Priest's Son": "these five hills / are the five demons / that Khandoba killed" (1-3).

This pilgrimage account of the poet highlights the mal-practice of looting simple people's wealth in the name of God. It also indicates at the prevailing corruption and ironic lack of faith at pilgrimage sites. It reminds one of Chausar's *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, which is an authentic account of the follies and vices of its time. Chausar uses the account of his pilgrimage undertaken by twenty-nine other pilgrims, as to expose the prevailing religious corruption and the vanity of high class women of his time.

Similar impression of pilgrimage can be found in the poetry of Keki N. Daruwalla. Being a Police officer Daruwalla is a keen observer and focuses on every minute detail with a secular and scientific lens, but does not ridicule faith and legends associated with a holy place, rather questions the basis of that faith tries to seek the answers himself. In his "Pilgrimage to Badrinath" published in *Apparitions in April* (1971), though he gives a materialistic eye-witness account of what he sees at the Badrinath temple, he is devoted simulatneously. As Jaydipsingh Dodia has opined in the preface to his *Indian English Poetry: Critical Perspective*, that poetry must deal in concrete terms with concrete experience. That experience may be intellectual or emotional . . . but it must be precise and lucidly and tangibly expressed". Daruwalla does not fail to give a precise and lucid account of his pilgrimage to Badrinath. The description is again marked by materialistic explanation of the landscape. "Alms for anchorites, rice for ancestors / and the prostrate darshan of amorphous stone?" (13-14). Here "rice for ancestors" refers to the rituals people perform at Badrinath for their ancestors. And "amorphous stone" refers to the sacred idol of Lord Vishnu. But as is the case with other poets, Kolatkar also mentions the hardships and pains of the pilgrimage:

Along the valley of the burning sun;  
 On flinty bridle-paths which centuries have trod  
 In penance and anonymous dust  
 The caravan of pain proceeds towards the gods.  
 (1-4, Pilgrimage to Badrinath)

In the "Introduction" to his *Critical Perspective: Poetry of the Daruwalla*, Inamdar "But we can't close our eyes to the fact that Daruwalla's sceptic mind is not critical of the religious show". Unlike Kolatkar, Daruwalla does not attempt at a cold blooded mockery of the holy shrine he visits. But, as a man of reason, he looks at everything with an argumentative and materialistic perspective. "We don't have a sceptic's point of view of places of pilgrimage in Daruwalla, as in Kolatkar's *Jehuri*. Instead, "Pilgrimage of Badrinath" "celebrates the union of the divine with the devotee" (Inamdar 2). He gives straight forward details and calls the idol a stone. Though he is sceptic sometimes and gives amusing undeviating details, but Daruwalla is never critical of religion and faith.

The heart in a moment's surrender to the God-feet  
 swirls into concentric of a motion  
 beyond dynamics. There is no alarm  
 as the soul thrills to its first passion. (24- 27)

Shiv K Kumar's poem "Pilgrimage" also disseminates similar feelings. In the poem a group is undertaking a pilgrimage to a temple of mother goddess and the group is also thinking about some easiest way to reach the pilgrim site. "Then suddenly someone announced / that the easiest way to hit / the destination was to march crabwise" (16-18). It is hilarious that the pilgrims are thinking of comfort and not of the deity they are going to worship. The undertone of irony heightens the significance of the poem. "The pilgrimage began though we are not told from



where to which place the pilgrims wanted to go. The hardships on the way due to rough weather and scanty supply of food dampened their spirits” (Das, 7).

Just like the journey in the “Enetprise” by Ezekiel, this journey also started with high spirits and even higher aims. But amusingly, due their lack of faith in God, it turns out to be an exhausting physical exercise and the pilgrims come to the conclusion that taking rest would be heaven:

We were out to span the sky’s amplitude  
 This journey was merely to stimulate the blood.  
 The women mumbled, ‘Rest would be heaven indeed’.  
 I was the only one to caution  
 That the gods has trapped us  
 Into belief. (19-26, Pilgrimage by Shiv K. Kumar)

Like Kolatkar, Shiv Kumar also transmits the idea that God or faith in God has trapped them (the pilgrims) to undertake this risky and meaningless journey. “The curves in life’s journey show that each dogmatic faith is a trap laid for man to fall in. It renders man helpless to be exploited by the crooked priests and clergymen” (Prabhat K. Singh, 130). The name of the poem is pilgrimage, yet there is not any concern and enthusiasm shown by the pilgrims to have a look of their deity. Lack of excitement results in fatigue and they lose their interest and start regretting their decision of undertaking the pilgrimage. In his poems “The Unbeliever”, Shiv Kumar again exposes the hypocrisy of the clergyman who preaches religious sermons but practises otherwise in his real life.

In another poem by Shiv K. Kumar “Kali” universal concerns have prevailed over religious beliefs. He is worried about the innocent lamb that is ready to be offered at the altar to satisfy the goddess Kali.

Beyond the priest’s monotone  
 A lamb bleats for the knife-edge  
 .....  
 But your nector is the blood  
 That jets from fresh arteries

In the end of the poem Shiv K. Kumar questions the practice of *bali* (sacrifice of an animal) to satisfy the Goddess. The doubt he raises hold universal appeal that taking away one’s life cannot be the way to appease gods. Once again, the poem begins with a personal note and experience but ends with a more general conclusion of global importance. At the end Kumar questions the practice of animal- sacrifice in the name of appeasing God.

If the way to create  
 Is the way to kill  
 I have hoarded enough blood  
 In my throat  
 For all the hyenas to suck from. ()

Similar thoughts have been uttered by the British poet Philip Larkin in his famous poem “Church Going”. Larkin’s narrator, who initially enters the church out of sheer curiosity, ends up with the feeling that it is not worthwhile to spend time at the church. Through his narrator Larkin states that there is not anything in the church to look for or that which can grasp his attention. He amusingly indicates that he found the Holy Scripture boring: “Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few / Hectoring large-scale verses and pronounce / “Here endeth” much more loudly than I’d mean” (13-18).

In a nutshell it can be discerned that Indian poetry in English has rampantly used pilgrimage to ponder over the religious insights of the general public. But the poets undertaking the journey do not have such faith and end up questioning the set beliefs associated with the journey. They have given a humorous and materialistic description of what they have experienced during the journey. They are not against religion but against the evil of religion. And through their sarcastic poetry they lash out at the superstitions prevalent in religion. Out of their religious journey, comes out a sceptic, ironic and humorous poetry which becomes a tool to voice their concern against this blind faith.

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