

# MYSTERY, SUBALTERNITY, AND PLURALITY: RECASTING BHAKTI IN THE POETRY OF ARUN KOLATKAR

## Abstract

Of all the literary traditions that have shaped and silhouetted the contours of modern Indian English Poetry, the contribution of Bhakti poetry stands out pre-eminently from the rest. The tradition of Bhakti Poetry provides a socio-cultural and spiritual cornucopia for many of the modern Indian English poets who find in the tradition a sustained flame that reignites their writing. The subversive poetics of Bhakti poetry characterized by the vision of the saint poets becomes a useful tool in the hands of many anti-establishment movements of contemporary Indian literatures in critiquing the hegemonic structures and canons that thwart the free spirit of life. It is in this context that we can situate the significance of Arun Kolatkar and his poetry. Kolatkar is one of the very few Indian English poets to have deeply internalized the sensibility of Bhakti tradition. He went to the extent of claiming the literary heirship of Sant Tukaram, and considered his poetry a continuation of the legacy. Hence it makes his poetry the most contesting as well as fascinating site to look for and understand the contemporary manifestations of the pan-Indian Bhakti tradition. Although the poet critiques and ridicules all canonized discourses including that of religion, through a sensitive and careful reading of his poems, one can find in his poetry an undercurrent of deep reverence for the mysterious dimensions of life. Kolatkar's poetry, much like the poetry of the saint-poets, resonates with a secular and mystical feel of spirituality. Interestingly, the celebration of mystery that Kolatkar's poetry thrives in is filled with and fuelled by an intimate detailing of the subaltern life; and at the same time, the transgressive politics of Bhakti gets a contemporary avatar in the poet's depiction of the subaltern life. The democratic and liberal impulses of Bhakti resurface in his poetry in the form of a poetic delineation of the plurality of life that offers a counter-narrative to the narrow discourses of fundamentalism and the hegemonic narratives of the nation-state. Unlike the Bhakti poetry that hinges around other-worldly theology, Kolatkar's poetry recasts the tenets of Bhakti and relates it to the pressing existential and ethical dilemmas of our times. Hence, focusing its gaze on the tropes of mystery, subalternity and plurality, this research ventures to explore the different shades and senses of Bhakti through a close textual analysis of Arun Kolatkar's poetry.

Key words: *Arun Kolatkar, Bhakti Poetry, Mystery, Subalternity, Plurality*