

Modern Pilgrimage Narratives and India's Heterogeneity

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Abstract : This paper focuses on modern pilgrimage narratives about sites affiliated with Indian religious expressions located both within and outside India. The paper uses a multidisciplinary approach to examine poetry, personal essays, and online attestations of pilgrimage to illustrate how non-religious ideas coexist with outwardly religious ones, exemplifying a characteristically Indian form of syncretism that pre-dates Western ideas of pluralism. The paper argues that the syncretism on display in these modern creative works refutes the current exclusionary vision of India as a primordially Hindu-nationalist realm. A crucial premise of this argument is that the narrative's intrinsic heteroglossia, so evident in India's historically rich variety of stories and symbols, belies this reactionary version of Hindu nationalism. Equally important to this argument, therefore, is the vibrancy of Hindu sites outside India, such as the Batu Caves temple complex in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The literary texts examined in this paper include, first, Arun Kolatkar's famous 1976 collection of poems, titled *Jejuri*, about a visit to the pilgrimage site of the same name in Maharashtra. Here, the modern, secularized visitor from Bombay (Mumbai) contemplates the effect of the temple complex on himself and on the other, more worshipful visitors. Kolatkar's modernist poems reflect the narrator's typically modern-Indian ambivalence for holy ruins, for although they do not evoke a conventionally religious feeling in him, they nevertheless possess an aura of timelessness that questions the narrator's time-conscious sensibility. The paper bookends Kolatkar's *Jejuri* with considerations of an early-twentieth-century text, online accounts by visitors to the Batu Caves, and a recent, more conventional Hindu account of pilgrimage. For example, the pioneering graphic artist Mukul Chandra Dey published in 1917, *My Pilgrimages to Ajanta and Bagh*, in which he devotes an entire chapter to the life of the Buddha as a means of illustrating the layering of stories that is a characteristic feature of sacred sites in India. In a different but still syncretic register, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, and a committed secularist proffers India's ancient pilgrimage network as a template for national unity in his classic 1946 autobiography *The Discovery of India*. Narrative is the perfect vehicle for highlighting this layering of sensibilities, for a single text can juxtapose the pilgrim-narrator's description with that of a far older pilgrimage, a juxtaposition that establishes an imaginative connection between otherwise distanced actors, and between them and the reader.

Keywords : India, literature, narrative, syncretism

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