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Ajamil and the Tigers



Arun Kolatkar

The tiger people went to their king
and said, 'We're starving.
We've had nothing to eat,
not a bite,
for 15 days and 16 nights.
Ajamil has got
a new sheep dog.
He cramps our style
and won't let us get within a mile
of meat.'

'That's shocking,'
said the tiger king.
'Why didn't you come to see me before?
Make preparations for a banquet.
I'm gonna teach that sheep dog a lesson he'll never
forget.'
'Hear hear,' said the tigers.
'Careful,' said the queen.
But he was already gone.
Alone
into the darkness before the dawn.

In an hour he was back,
the good king.
A black patch on his eye.
His tail in a sling.
And said, 'I've got it all planned
now that I know the lie of the land.
All of us will have to try.
We'll outnumber the son of a bitch.'

And this time there will be no hitch.
Because this time I shall be leading the attack.'

Quick as lightning
the sheep dog was.
He took them all in as prisoners of war,
the 50 tigers and the tiger king,
before they could get their paws
on a single sheep.
They never had a chance.
The dog was in 51 places all at once.
He strung them all out in a daisy chain
and flung them in front of his boss in one big heap.

'Nice dog you got there, Ajamil,'
said the tiger king.
Looking a little ill
and spiting out a tooth.
'But there's been a bit of a misunderstanding.
We could've wiped out your herd in one clean sweep.
But we were not trying to creep up on your sheep.
We feel that means are more important than ends.
We were coming to see you as friends.
And that's the truth.'

The sheep dog was the type
who had never told a lie in his life
He was built along simpler lines
and he was simply disgusted.
He kept on making frantic signs.
But Ajamil, the good shepherd
refused to meet his eyes
and pretended to believe every single word
of what the tiger king said.
And seemed to be taken in by all the lies.

Ajamil cut them loose
and asked them all to stay for dinner.
It was an offer the tigers couldn't refuse.
And after the lamb chops and the roast,

when Ajamil proposed
 they sign a long term friendship treaty,
 all the tigers roared.
 'We couldn't agree with you more.'
 And swore they would be good friends all their lives
 as they put down the forks and the knives.

Ajamil signed a pact
 with the tiger people and sent them back.
 Laden with gifts of sheep, leather jackets and balls of
 wool.
 Ajamil wasn't a fool.
 Like all good shepherds he knew
 that even tigers have got to eat some time.
 A good shepherd sees to it they do.
 He is free to play a flute all day
 as well fed tigers and fat sheep drink from the same
 pond
 with a full stomach for a common bond.

ABOUT THE POET

Arun Kolatkar (1932–2004) is a contemporary Indian poet. He was educated in Pune and earned a diploma in painting from the J.J. School of arts, Mumbai. He writes both in English and Marathi and has authored two books. The present poem is an excerpt from *Jejuri*— a long poem in thirty-one sections. A German translation of *Jejuri* by Gievanen Bandin was published in 1984.

UNDERSTANDING THE POEM

1. The poem has a literal level and a figurative level. Why has the poet chosen 'tigers' and 'sheep' to convey his message?
2. What facet of political life does the behaviour of Ajamil illustrate?
3. Why have the words, 'pretended' and 'seemed' been used in the lines:

...**pretended** to believe every single word
 of what the tiger king said.

And **seemed** to be taken in by all the lies.

How does the sense of these lines connect with the line 'Ajamil wasn't a fool'?

4. Why did Ajamil refuse to meet the sheepdog's eyes?
5. 'He is free to play a flute all day as well fed tigers and fat sheep drink from the same pond with a full stomach for a common bond.'

What do the phrases 'play the flute all day' and 'a common bond' refer to?

6. The poem is a satire against the present political class. How effectively does it convey the anger and anguish of the common man trapped in the system?

TRY THIS OUT

Find out the difference between these literary forms

(a) fable (b) allegory (c) satire.

SUGGESTED READING

1. *Jejuri* by Arun Kolatkar.

