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*This poem was written after a trek from Mirtola to Jageshwar, a cluster of ancient temples dating back to between the seventh and twelfth centuries A.D., passing pristine deodar forests, on a path shown to us by Ashishda sometime in the mid-80s. While initially, the poem expresses the poet's disillusionment with her own spiritual heritage, and the disintegrating social and political situation in her own country; at the end, she finds peace by experiencing a unity with nature. The last four lines of the poem are a reference to the festival of Harela, in which fresh green stalks are cut.*

## **Jageshwar by Rachna Joshi**

Twelve ancient temples in Jageshwar.

The initial pines lead to the inevitable deodar.

Its green, dark needles—vertical layers moving in wayward lines.

We tramped (modern half-breeds, urbane, mixed-up),

To seek the benediction of the ancient world.

Like plants that become deformed in their reaching back,

The roots entwined, the leaves losing sap.

The constraints of caste and region have feathered

And tarred our faces. We are the pariah Indians,

The few idealists who seek oneness in a country

Torn by every known difference.

Could I say when I reached the humped group of temples

Guarded by the sentinel wind of the Himalayas

That I desired union?

The lingam leering at the obscenity of my prurient soul,

The world—the flesh and paradise,

The same old grindshow of Everyman and God.

I have tried to taste of the tree of knowledge,

Have aspired beyond the limits

Of an Indian Brahmin girl,

Born with a bewildering array of puritan forefathers

Who recited hymns and shlokas for all occasions:

For birth, marriage, childbirth, fornication

Adultery, murder, and what have you.

With sacred threads and grey ashes,

They broke the coconuts of inauguration.

I rise like a throwback—I muck up everything down the line,

The generations-old intellect, the strict decorum,

My blood wants the palpability of earthly love—

Not to obscure the predatory passions

Within the sanctified code.

Till I passed Jageshwar:

The clotted deodars, the smokewood huts,

The scattered pines, the humped shrines.

Shaggy closeness of rhododendrons, smells of raw peaches,

The leopard-tracks, the wild bird's cry

The pit-viper's slither, the pariah's bark,

The mountain streams and the twisted trees.

The wooden mounds that burn the dead.

I felt like a girl going to harvest new green stalks,

The first of the season,

In an old village set in the pines—with twelve ancient temples

And the bells chiming for the snows across the valley.