

22. Basic Principles of Indian Art

Art is one of those ideas which evade clear definition. Being abstract in its nature it does not lend itself to being expressed in concrete things which our logical mind can easily grasp. All the same, several definitions have been given, each having a bearing on some special aspect of Culture in its most general sense. Goethe called it "the magic of the soul", Schiller thought of it as that "which gives man his lost dignity". To Carlyle it is "the dis-imprisoned soul of fact". He also says, "In all true works of art wilt thou discern Eternity looking through time, the Godlike rendered visible". Wagner defines it in various ways: "The pleasure one takes in being what he is", "The highest manifestation of the communal life in man", "The accomplishment of our desire to find ourselves again among the phenomena of the external world", and so on. Another thinker looks upon it as "a way of hastening our growth by vicariously acquiring experiences". Dr. Ananda Coomaraswami considers the artist not as "one who makes but one who finds". A. Clutton Brock puts it in a very striking way when he says "When all the knowledge, skill and passion of mankind are poured into an acknowledgment of something greater than themselves, then that acknowledgment is Art". Of course Art is all this, but it is also much more; it is the essence of Life, a way of revelation of Life and its meaning, an expression of the "soul of fact", to use Carlyle's phrase.

Art in India has always been considered a path of realisation of the Ultimate Reality. It is spiritual in its outlook, idealistic in expression and sublime in interpretation. It is not merely a matter of sensuous enjoyment, not a luxury to be enjoyed by the leisured rich class of people or zamindars or state rulers, not something to amuse oneself with.

It has a deeper basis and a more exalted aim. It was considered to be as vital for human progress as Devotion or Knowledge or Love. God was considered to be the fountain of all Beauty as He was considered to be the source of all Knowledge, Power and Wisdom. Just as people try to reach Godhead (or at least get a glimpse thereof) through the Path of Knowledge or the Path of Devotion, so through Art some people attempt to sense Divinity. God is not only omniscient and omnipotent, He is also all-beautiful. Plato described the Divine Trinity as the Good, the True and the Beautiful. How can there be any beauty down here but for the Beauty of God. Every object of beauty in this world, whether it be beauty of sound, beauty of form, beauty of colour, beauty of pose, or beauty of rhythm, is but a shadow, however faint, of the Beauty that is of God. Why does a glorious sunset rouse in us a feeling of joy? Because we sense something of the Beauty of God in that sunset. So also the small rippling stream meandering through shady groves of fruit-laden trees, the green mountain slopes from which shoot up here and there gigantic trees, the enchanting multihued rainbow shining in the eastern sky on a rainy afternoon, the gentle cooing of the cuckoo as well as the soul-stirring music of the gifted expert, the majestic gait of the proud royal elephant as well as the mirthful leap of the nimble antelope—all these reveal to us something of the Beauty of God and hence are objects of joy. A thing of beauty is verily a joy for ever, for through it God reveals to us something of His Love and Joy, His Ananda. Beautiful objects are, as it were, so many doors through which we can peep into the infinitely sublime Beauty of the Creator. The more we admire and love and delight in loving them the more we can sense the Divine. He who is all Bliss reveals something of His Bliss to all who see in Beauty a Divine quality. God as Absolute Beauty is one of the basic ideas of Ancient Hindu Culture. Rukmini addresses

Shri Krishna as *Bhuvana Sundara* (the most beautiful in the universe), Madhusoodana Saraswati, the great advaitic scholar, described Shri Krishna as *Soundaryasarasarvaswa* (the entire essence of Beauty). But for His Beauty how can there be anything beautiful in creation? Love of Beauty in the abstract is one of the most effective weapons with which to fight the attractions of the lower world.

The artist tries to bring Godhead nearer to us by working along the line of the Beauty-aspect of God. Man is a miniature God, he has in himself potentially all the Divine faculties. He may have only a little knowledge now, but he will become a great knower in due course; he may have only a little love at present, but at some future date he will be capable of infinite Love. Every aspect of Divinity has its counterpart in man and man can reach Divinity by developing and sublimating one or other of these aspects in him. Artists, by developing the creative aspect in themselves, try to reveal to us something of God's Beauty down here.

So, art is verily a path to the Supreme; it is a Yoga, Soundarya Yoga, so to say. Artists are, at any rate ought to be, great yogis in their own way. Great Rishis and Devas have been great artists; the authorship of some of our art traditions is traced to great sages. The very names given to some of the Deities show how much emphasis was laid upon this aspect of Art. *Nataraja* is the *arch-dancer*, *Ranganatha* means the *stage manager*. All art expressions in India had a spiritual background.

In ancient India Art went hand in hand with Religion. In one sense we may say, Art turned inward is Religion and Religion turned outward is Art. Temples have been repositories of all arts; they have enshrined not only idols of deities but art treasures as well. The architecture of some

of our temples dazzles us, some works of sculpture amaze us with their exquisite beauty. Why? They are not the work of ordinary masons and carpenters, they are the work of great *bhaktas* in whom the love of God welled up and found expression in such work; they lived but to serve God, they effaced themselves in their work of love, they did not care to be known to posterity as great artists, their work was anonymous; the only thing that mattered to them was the offering they made to the Lord in the form of such art treasures. These great works of art were not made to order so to say; they came as a result of a deep inner urge and hence their unique greatness. This is the uniqueness of Indian Art.

We have heard of the great Haridas Swami, the teacher of Tansen of the court of Akbar. Once Akbar asked Tansen what was the secret of the unique charm of his music; and Tansen said, "Sire, what is my music when compared to the music of my master, Haridas Swami.!" Akbar was greatly intrigued to hear this and urged Tansen to take him to the Swami and after much persuasion Akbar was taken to the ashrama of Haridas. Tansen had warned the Emperor already not to expect the Swami to sing but of his own accord. They waited till the mood came to him one day and the Swami sang. Was it mere song? No! It was a new revelation. Akbar felt lifted out of his mundane world and borne on the wings of Eternity to realms of sheer Beauty. Charm, Peace and Bliss. Turning to Tansen he said, "I never knew that there could be such music. I thought yours was the limit of perfection. But by the side of this music yours appears lifeless and empty. How is it that having learnt at his feet you have not caught the soul of his art?" Tansen smiled and said, "I can never sing like my master, it is true that I learnt the art from him; I might have mastered the technicalities of the art, but there is this difference. I sing to your bidding but my master sings to no man's bidding.

he sings when the urge comes from inside and that makes all the difference."

To the artist the outer world of phenomena is but a reflection of Divine Thought and he tries to get at that Thought by the contemplation of its reflection down here. The outer expression has a meaning only in so far as it reflects some idea behind; this idea is more significant to the artist than its outer expression. He wants to understand things not as they seem but as they really are. So to the artist the phenomenal world is only a means to enable him to get at the noumenal world behind; to him objects and events have a new meaning; they have a message for him and it is this message that he tries to give through his art creations. Like the old duke in Shakespeare's "As you like it", the artist finds "tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones and good (may I add truth and beauty) in everything." To the artist:

"A careless shoe-string in whose tie
I see a wild civility
Doth more bewitch me than when Art
Is too precise in every part."

Thus we see why Indian art has been Idealistic and Symbolic rather than realistic. To the Indian artist art is not an imitator, is not reproducer, it is on the other hand a creator, an interpreter. The so-called "realism" in art is foreign to Indian art expression. A work of art is to him an expression of one's experience. It is also a universal language of deep human emotions. It must express some of the great realities of life. It must be a symbol of some of the ever-lasting principles which sustain the world. This we shall see best when we take Indian painting or Indian sculpture. The Indian painter gives only second place to

realistic reproduction. If he paints a person he paints not only that person but the type to which that person belongs, not only a passing mood but the real character of the person, and he attempts to express through that painting what God wants to express through that individual. And so it is the combination of what that person is at the moment, what the person generally is and what God wants him to be. If it is merely a question of reproducing that person on a piece of canvas or paper, we do not require a great painter for it; a photographic plate will do the trick. Why then do we go in for great artists to give us great works of painting? It is because of this essential difference between mere imitation and purposeful creative expression. Great artists deal primarily with types and only secondarily with individuals belonging to that type. Type, rather arche-type, is the common idea behind all the individuals of that type. We often deal in our minds only with these types. And only in trying to visualise mentally we come down from the world of types into the world of forms. While there may be hundreds of tables, the typical table, that is the idea of the table or the quality of being a table, is a common concept and it is these conceptual types behind material forms that the Indian artist is chiefly concerned with.

It is something like this that the Manus and other Master-builders are doing all the time. They get glimpses of God's Plan and the great types in His Mind which have to be brought down and materialised here, and build forms here approaching more and more those types. The Manu builds form after form, works at it, improves on it, so that it may come nearer and nearer to the ideal form as seen in His plan. That is also what an artist does, though in a different way altogether. Every work of a true artist is only an attempt to bring down God's ideas so that the less evolved amongst us may be helped to understand God's Plan for us. And so the artist presents to us great types into which

we can group all the things around us and thereby get a glimpse of the harmony and orderliness of God's creation.

In drama we have this aspect of art clearly brought out. The immortal lines of Shakespeare,

".....All the world's a stage

And all the men and women merely players,"

are as true as that the stage is a world and all the characters in it represent men and women of different types. The characters in a great drama are not merely individuals but great types. And by studying one such character we come to understand a number of persons belonging to that type. A Dushyantha, an Iago, a Hamlet, a Sakuntala, is a type and lives in all ages and in all countries. Each presents to us a type, but a type akin to that in the Mind of God. The dramatist sums up in himself many varieties of experiences and out of them spins the types and presents them to the world. To quote C. Jinarajadasa, "Shakuntala moves men's hearts in the west as in the east, and now as of old. All Shakespeare's great characters are still with us; translate his plays into any language, and though as poems they lose much, the characters in them lose nothing at all. By studying each character—rather, by understanding each with our intuitions—we know the psychology of hundreds of souls of that type. If we but understand Macbeth or Othello with our intuitions, then all men of that type are understood by us; we know their past actions, and we can anticipate what they will think and do, and so help them and ourselves..... Through the types in the great dramas we look into the archetypes of thoughts and emotions, and of souls themselves".

By a study of these characters we can anticipate experiences and guard ourselves against pitfalls. It is not neces-

sary for us to undergo every possible experience before we can become perfect. We have in us something of a Dushyanta, something of a Hamlet and possibly something of an Iachimo also. But we can learn many a lesson by studying these characters in the great dramas and purify our natures accordingly. We can anticipate many an experience and prepare ourselves beforehand to meet such an experience. If we study some of the villains in the great dramas we can without being villains ourselves acquire their experiences so to say, vicariously, and thereby we can quicken our evolution considerably. This is one of the most important qualities of all true art.

In sculpture also we have this element of constructing types. Many of the statues we find in Hindu temples have been constructed on this principle. The great artists who made them tried to construct typical synthetic figures; they took whatever was, in their opinion, ideally beautiful in nature and made a synthesis of it in such figures. Those may not conform to our ordinary conception of realistic beauty, but they have a perfect rhythm about them, a certain suggestiveness which makes a deep impression on us. In their attempt to include all kinds of beauty they did not even leave out animals. Some of the figures show a curious admixture of human and animal elements. A synthetic figure will rarely resemble any known figure; it is never meant to be so. Sir R. Owen constructed a model of a synthetic animal showing the common characteristics of a large group of animals; but it was so entirely unlike any animal known to us. So also some of the figures in our temples present curious specimens. But the attempt made there is not to imitate nature but to present types embodying some common characteristics. That is why very many people fail to understand and appreciate the art embodied in such figures. That they are striking in a way cannot be denied, but if one has to grasp the idea underlying them

and understand the symbology of such figures he will have to view these from the proper standpoint; else he will probably be repulsed by the outer form and miss their true significance.

It is also on this principle that rules have been framed for image-making, architecture and so forth. Great artists who have sensed archetypes have given us certain directions, they are only the minimum conditions that must be fulfilled if the work is to present types and not merely be an imitation. Beyond these the artist is entirely free. Such directions, if they come from a great Master-artist, supply a tradition of immense value to others who aspire to become artists. If it were possible to have minute directions coming from such a master-mind, the work done in accordance therewith is bound to be remarkable in an ideal manner.

True Art enables us to rise through the outer phenomena to the Reality behind them, to pierce through the limitations around us and realise the unlimited, in short, to understand the mind of God in relation to His creations. We can get an idea of this distinguishing quality of art if we consider the scenery painting and the dramatic art. All philosophies tell us that there are two great limitations under which we evolve and to which we must be subject as long as manifestation lasts; all other kinds of limitations can be analysed and resolved into these two fundamental limitations, viz., limitations of Space and Time, the two great pillars supporting the complicated structure of this manifested universe. In scenery painting the artist attempts to lift us above the limitation of space. A certain amount of spatial expanse is necessary to produce a particular effect on our consciousness. If the same effect can be produced by a much less quantity of space of lower dimensions, then it shows that there lies a method of freeing ourselves from the space-limitation. By continuing this process of depending

less and less upon space for the subjective modification which is ordinarily the result of objective space it is theoretically possible to get beyond space. That is what we have in scenery painting. The scenery represented in it might have extended over many many miles in actual space in the three dimensions, but all that you have on a few square feet of canvas or paper. It is only when you relate it to things around you that you begin to cognise the actual size of the canvas. But if you concentrate your attention upon the picture and remain oblivious of other things the impression you get is the same as if you were standing in front of a vast scenery. So, while Nature requires many hundreds of cubic miles to produce an impression upon you, the artist accomplishes the same object on a canvas of a few square inches. There we have clearly an attempt to transcend the limitation of space.

What scenery painting is to space that the drama is to time. Incidents of many years are there presented in the space of a few hours; for the time you feel as if you are moving in time with the characters. Not only this; if it be really a good play written by an artistic genius you are to some extent lifted out of time and placed 'beyond time', where the past, the present and the future coalesce into one "Eternal Now". The characters and the incidents of the drama will not be merely particular individuals or occurrences but will be true for all ages. Experiences of many centuries would be gathered up and presented through the action of the play; and out of the different impressions produced there will emerge a thought which is independent of the time of action of the play or of particular characters in it, but will represent a truth which will obtain at all times and under all conditions. In fact, the great dramas are the great generalisations of the process of nature at all times; the characters in them do not pertain to any particular period of human history. As Willian Hazlitt put it,

"the stage is an epitome, a bettered likeness of the world with the dull part left out", and so in drama we see the beginnings of a process which will ultimately take us out of time into a condition which is beyond the past, the present and the future.

Another important aspect of Art which is not so well recognised is that it gives permanence to ephemeral objects and events in actual life. A beautiful sunset occurs in Nature only at a certain time and under certain conditions. If the evening sun is hidden behind heavy clouds or if it rains heavily at sunset Nature cannot provide that beautiful sunset. So to enjoy a glorious sunset in nature we have to wait for the evening and also for the conditions that will ensure it. But a sunset painted by an artist is a permanent record of what happens in nature only once in a way; so what is transitory in nature is by Art given an unique permanence and can be enjoyed by us at any time.

So also a narration of an incident, however important it be historically and politically, is of immediate interest only for the time being, its repetitions later on will be of little interest. But a poetic version of any occurrence is of perennial interest.

Art supplements life and makes it fuller. Our world is full of limitations, deficiencies and disappointments; it is very dull and far from what we would like it to be. But in an artistic presentation all these gaps are filled, dull parts omitted, all shortcomings made good, with the result that we get a complete picture, an ideal representation which approximates to the idea in the mind of God. An artist, however barren his outer life may appear to be, can live a much fuller life by supplementing in his art creations what he misses in actual life. Life may be dull, may be lacking in joy; but by integrating it with his art creations the artist

achieves a fullness, a completeness which would otherwise be impossible of achievement.

Indian art expressions are often symbols of great realities. He may paint a great person with arms going down to the knees (they speak of him as ajanubahu). This may look queer to people whose ideas of art centre round the so-called real things they see around them. Long arm merely means great prowess. They may give ten heads to an individual to indicate that his brain power is ten times that of the ordinary individual. Such figures are very common in Indian art, and they have to be taken as symbols and interpreted properly. If one begins to judge these things by the standard of imitative realism, he is doomed to miss the essential idea behind. To lead us from the particular to the general, from the phenomenal to the noumenal, from the concrete to the abstract, from the shadow to the reality, from the seen to the unseen, from the "seeming" to the "being", is the true object of Indian Art.

When we come to music we reach the perfection of all the ideals of art. All other arts tend towards the condition of music. As C. Jinarajadasa puts it, we generally describe other arts in terms of musical thoughts: we come across expressions like "frozen music" for architecture. All the aims of the different arts find their fulfilment in this, the greatest of all arts. In some mysterious way it takes us out of the lower realms of existence into sublime regions where we at least for the time being, feel our life fuller, sweeter and nobler. It works out an emotional alchemy in our nature; after hearing a piece of really good music we feel as if we have passed through a process of purification. All arts do this to some extent, but in music the effect is so telling that any one, if he only cares, can observe it. Purifying our emotions it kindles the intuitional nature in us and enables us to see things in a fuller light. Music is verily a purified;

it lifts up, so to say, the several fragments of our emotional nature and places them before us for us to examine and criticise; at the same time it also makes a synthesis of them so that our emotions are the purer, higher and finer for that process. It takes us all out of this world's turmoil and places us in those higher realms of being where all is joy and peace. All this it does, not so much by cold logic or reasoning, but through the super-rational faculty of intuition, which like a lightning flash illumines our vision and enables us to realise life in a way not ordinarily possible otherwise. Music, as Carlyle put it, is truly "the language of the Gods, it is divine". Life should be infinitely poorer without it.

Art is essentially a creative faculty; mere imitation is not true art at all. And creation is an act of joy and sacrifice too, the very sacrifice being the source of joy. We have all of us a bit of that Divine faculty of creation in us, and the Divine artist in us ever seeks to exercise this creative faculty; and every one of us will under that impulse

".....something make,

And joy in the making."

to use the words of an English poet Laureate. Hence it is that true art leads to and springs from joy. The two are interdependent. The greatest help we can render to art is to remove gloom and sorrow, and spread joy every where. An artist if he is to give the best in him for humanity must be given the necessary surroundings for the expression of his art. He should have no worry or care, there must be no need for him to think about anything but his own art. He must be well provided for if he is to fulfill his mission in life. He is a national asset whom we cannot afford to neglect. Much of our joy in life comes through art and by neglecting

and looking down upon artists we shall be shutting out an important source of joy which makes life a song of never ending sweetness.

Human life without art is incomplete, it is barren. While acquisition of knowledge is good in its own way and develops the mental capacity in man, it is through art that his emotional nature (and when this is sublimated, intuitional aspect) is developed best. If one is content only with bread and butter there is little to distinguish him from the beast. So the poet sang "one who is without the gifts of the art of music or poetry is verily a beast devoid of tail and horns." What distinguishes the cultured man from the beast is his capacity to appreciate art. One may not be an artist in practice, but ability to appreciate the significance of works of art is necessary for culture. There is an old Chinese proverb which says, "if you have two loaves, sell one and buy a lily", the implication being that an object of beauty around you is as important as bread and butter; the latter feeds and builds your body while the former feeds and nourishes your soul. Every object of beauty is a messenger of God, the Beautiful, and unconsciously draws forth from us response to the Infinite Beauty of God and awakens us to the real significance of things that we see around us.

For a balanced cultivation of human emotions, there is nothing so powerful as art. Good art purifies our feelings, subdues violent passions, rouses higher emotions and sublimates them into something delicate and beautiful. The one striking effect will be that the emotions become impersonal. With proper artistic training we shall be able to enjoy joy and sorrow impersonally. We shall be able to get joy even out of sorrow. Ananda, Bliss, is above these pairs of opposites, joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain. When we witness a tragedy written by a real artist, and represented by good actors, we put ourselves *en rapport* with the characters for

the time being and we weep with the sufferers and laugh with the joyous characters. When we do that very weeping we derive an aesthetic pleasure, and for that impersonal, aesthetic, sublimated pleasure, we are tempted to go to the same play over and over again, to weep with the character and vicariously undergo all his suffering.

Above all art is a great unifier. A real artist is above caste, above creed, above nationality, above sex. A good work of art is appreciated everywhere. In some of the exhibitions of Indian art in the western countries, people whose make-up is artistic go into raptures over the great beauty and sublimity which characterise Indian art. Art is one of the most effective ways of expressing human soul. Human experience is fundamentally the same everywhere. People weep everywhere, love everywhere, smile everywhere. Unsophisticated expressions of one's inner being have always a universality about them.

Art enriches life. It gives a new meaning to life. It gives us a deeper understanding, a more lasting sense of the values of life. By making our nature artistic we unconsciously develop a sense of fitness in us. We instinctively feel what is good, what is true, and what is not either. Our nature becomes so attuned to the harmony and beauty of nature, which is in a sense the Mirror of God, that we, as a matter of habit, go in for the good and the noble and avoid the bad, the ugly and the mean. Civilised man having any pretensions to culture should have in him this inner poise which a power to appreciate art brings with it, a poise which enables one to understand things not as they seem, but as they are, to look not merely at an object but through it into the Mind of God which worked and created that object; a poise which helps one to realise

"That Beauty is not, as fond men misdeem
An outward show of things, that only seem;

For it is heavenly born and cannot die
Being a parcel of the purest sky."

Every nation has a special gift to give to the world, a special message to proclaim, a unique contribution to make, a purpose to fulfil. When it fails to do it or when it has served its purpose it fades away from the world-picture. While nations have come and gone India still lives, for she has still a purpose to serve, a message to give. I feel it is in the plan of God that she has to lead the world in certain aspects of life. It is up to us to enable her to fulfil her mission. Indian outlook, based as it is on the realisation of ultimate Reality, has to dominate the thought of the world if it is to be saved from destruction. In the realm of Art we have a unique contribution to make. We have to treasure the distinctive features of our fine arts, free them from excrescences and maintain their purity. A nation's arts are true expressions of her soul and one cannot tinker with them with impunity. Plato warned people against changing the distinctive style of music of a nation lest it should lead to serious consequences and even undermine the very foundation of the state. While there should be expansion, assimilation and growth in every phase of life, the individual uniqueness of a nation's art should at all costs be preserved. Now that we have freed ourselves of the shackles that handicapped us so far we must utilise that political freedom to achieve real freedom in all aspects of our national life. Are we really free? Economic and political freedom pertain only to the surface; have we achieved inner freedom, are we culturally free, are we independent in our thought, in our ideas? Western ideas of life and man have held us in bondage long, we have been almost hypnotised into thinking along western lines of thought. Let us be frank with ourselves and ask the question, "Do we not still think along western lines, do we not base our judgment still on western standards, even in our habits and dresses, do not the old

ideas still persist?" We have to bestir ourselves, rid ourselves of the old mental cob-webs and enable our nation to give her gift of art, culture, and philosophy to the world. We have to hold aloft the great ideals of our Arts. The power and strength so characteristic of our Architecture, the delicacy and idealism of our paintings, the balance and beauty of poise of our Sculpture, the grace and rhythm of our Dance, the subtlety and spiritual appeal of our Music, all these have to be preserved and vitalised.