



Ethics As Taught By Indian Art

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Truth, since times ancient, has always existed in Indian thought and tradition. It was first revealed to the ancient sages through their sense of perception and hearing, and hence known as 'shruti' – that which has been heard and must continue to be heard down the ages. Truth must be kept alive by memory, hence 'smṛti' – that which has been remembered and must continue likewise. And finally, it is to be uttered, because only then can its latent power become manifest in totality. And the message that sacred Indian scriptures convey to us, time and again, is that, truth is to be proclaimed, and its utterance carries vital power; hence the emphasis upon the efficacy of mantras, the importance of memory, and the divine power of Vac, the speech principle as deified in the RgVeda.ⁱ

Truth, in Indian thought, reveals itself in myriad dimensions – it is form, it is also formless. It is tangible, and yet, it is intangible.

It is Purusha, Atman, it is the human soul residing within, within the Antarhrdaya akasha, ten fingers wide. As the Purusha Sukta enlightens us –

*'Sa Bhumini Vishwato Vṛtvaatyattishtha dashaangulam'*ⁱⁱ

It is Shiva, it is Brahman, it is all pervading and, as rightly pointed out by the celebrated poet Kalidasa that, none is able to understand His form correctly –

*'Na santi yatharthavidah pinakinah'*ⁱⁱⁱ

The terms Brahman, Purusha and Atman are almost all-pervading in Indian culture and thought, and despite their apparent abstractness, they have greatly influenced the theory and practice of the arts. These three concepts belong to the supreme or transcendent level (para). Passing from the inner or abstract to the outer or concrete stands Sharira, the body in all its gross and subtle dimensions. The external manifestation of abstract or symbolical ideas is the work of art which combines the idea with a form, and which involves skill in treating a material – Shilpa. The creation of a beautiful form cannot be separated from its creator, hence Shilpin, the artist/artisan and the qualities he incorporates, must also be acknowledged along with his art.^{iv}

In essence, Truth exists in the form of a seed or a kernel – a nuclear idea of enormous potential but in need of analysis and elaboration before its full range of meaning can begin to become apparent.^v And it is this image, that the artist seeks to give form to, through his imagination, by way of the creative process, such that, in the end, s/he accomplishes in creating a work of Art. And as Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy wrote in 1923:

'The memory picture- or rather, a synthetic image based on past experience- is from first to last the essential foundation of Indian art.....The Indian method is always one of visualisation – unconscious in primitive, systematised in the mature art. Indian art is always a language employing symbols, valid only by tradition and convention'^{vi}

Eminent English psychologist Dr. Graham Wallas speaks of four distinct stages of this creative process^{vii} which enables the human mind to visualise, to contemplate, to imagine and re-imagine, and to create. Through these four stages, the creative mind is able to perceive this seed of nuclear idea, this memory picture from past experience, and ensure its transformation from the intangible image to its tangible form through symbols that are subtle and suggestive, that help bridge the unconscious to the conscious, the formless to the form, thereby conspicuously linking tradition to innovation.

The creative process begins with **Inspiration**, the source of which may be psychological, social, cultural or even political, that causes the seed of the idea/image to appear within the realm of the creator's subconscious mind. **Preparation**, the first stage, propels him/her to use his imagination and prior knowledge in contemplation and analysis of this idea/ image thus, nascently emerged. **Incubation**, the second stage, is the activity within the unconscious realm of the creative mind, wherein the idea/image begins to take shape but is not yet known to the conscious mind. In the next stage, **Illumination**, the form that has taken shape in the unconscious realm reveals itself to the conscious mind such that the creator, in a flash of awakening and intuition, visualises this form; in this inner state s/he sees the perfect Form and is able to relate it to the material world. Finally, **Identification** allows the creative mind to experience and realise this perfect Form such that the creator is now able to identify the means and methods, in concrete terms, necessary for the transformation to its tangible form, such that s/he may proceed to execution.^{viii}

The Vastu Sutra Upanishad, too, describes in detail the evolution, in the creative realm, of this image from the unconscious to the conscious state of the human mind. It states –

“Prateetat prateekah”^{ix} and continues to further explain this sutra as, “Prateeta – Prateeka – Pratima – kramena treeeni mukhyani”^x.

Thus, as Alice Boner explains, from the realisation, comes the symbol. But what is of foremost importance here, is the sequential progression of *Prateeta* (realisation or intuitive perception), *Prateeka* (symbol), *Pratima* (image) by way of which the intangible formless manifests itself in its tangible form. As is known from the field of psychology, sense-impressions through the eye and the ears have a more compelling and direct impact on the subconscious strata of the human mind than discursive arguments. This subconscious of the human soul not only obeys but also depends directly upon universal cosmic laws. And when any work of art takes its form from fundamental cosmic principles, it participates in the essential structure of the universe and contains a natural symbolism to which the uninitiated responds instinctively, unconsciously, while the initiated, consciously. Hence the need for the refinement of the eye and the ear, which Bharata in his *Natyashastra* repeatedly emphasises, thus leading to intuitive knowledge.

The Indian artist is therefore concerned with the 'Form' in the abstract, in its 'Formless', as design imbued with a surcharged consciousness of the totality. S/he gives this form, many forms, always bearing in mind the inner state in which s/he saw the perfect Form. The technique of the particular arts is the methodology of evoking a similar psychical experience in the informed spectator or listener, the *Sahridaya*^{xi}.

Eminent and influential German philosopher Immanuel Kant, while discussing on art and its aesthetic value, insists that the basis of an aesthetic judgement should be discernment of end or purpose, that the work of art under scrutiny/evaluation serves, and that its highest attainment should be to become the symbol of moral good. But even before one must begin to evaluate or judge, the foremost sensibility that is to be acquired through cultivation is an awareness of what Art is, or what may be labelled as art.

Art may be regarded, according to Leo Tolstoy, as a communication of speech and thought, along with the senses of proportion and beauty.

Art may also be understood, as Rabindranath Tagore states, as the response of man's creative soul to the call of the real^{xii}.

Again, art may be considered, in Acharya Vishwanath's words from his much revered Sahitya Darpana, as,

'Vakyam Rasatmakam Kavyam'^{xiii},

which Dr. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy interprets as, "Art is Expression Informed by Ideal Beauty"^{xiv}

Now, aesthetic judgement of any art is always preceded by the aesthetic experience (rasasvadana). Rasasvadana has been defined in Sahitya Darpana and interpreted by Coomaraswamy as:

'Pure aesthetic experience is theirs in whom the knowledge of ideal beauty is innate; it is known intuitively, in intellectual ecstasy without accompaniment of ideation, at the highest level of conscious being'.^{xv}

Aesthetics is therefore the highest realm of activity of the human mind.

Following the cultivation of a sense of what art is, one must next seek to understand what purpose should any art serve, for, as Kant states, its aesthetic judgement must be premised on the discernment of its end or purpose. The justification, then, for the very need and therefore the creation of any form of art – be it poetry, dance, drama, music, sculpture or painting, is to be comprehended with reference to its use (prayojana) or its value (purushartha), thus reiterating that Art subserves the Four Purposes of Life, namely, Right Action (dharma), Pleasure (kama), Wealth (artha), and Spiritual Freedom (moksha). Of these, the first three represent the proximate, the last, the ultimate ends of life. It is then only appropriate that a work of art be determined likewise, proximately, with regard to immediate use, and ultimately, with regard to aesthetic experience. This aesthetic experience (rasanubhuti) is an inscrutable and uncaused spiritual activity, that is virtually ever-present and potentially realisable, but not possible to be realised unless and until all affective and mental barriers have been resolved, all knots of the heart undone, the experience arising in relation to some specific representation – the work of art itself.

The Natyashastra recognises eight emotive sentiments and their corresponding moods as the means for rendering value and beauty to music, dance and dramaturgy:

'Ashtam rasa, trayo gita-vaaditrayaa.....'^{xvi}

Bharata further admits that the primary rasas are four, namely, shringara or the erotic, raudra or the furious, veera or the heroic and vibhatsa or the disgusting. The other rasa or sentiments proceed from these primary ones. And it is these primary and secondary sentiments, in confluence with the eight permanent moods called Sthayi bhavas^{xvii}, that are not only essential but intrinsic to music, dance and dramaturgy. Now, what is sentiment or rasa. To this, Bharata says,

*'Atra rasa iti ka padaartha
Uchyate, aasvaadyatvaat'*^{xviii}

Rasa is that which is only to be experienced, it is that intangible life-force for want of which, music becomes barren and lifeless. Finally, expounding the process of creation of rasa, Bharata proposes his famous Rasa Sutra thus –

'Vibhava anubhava vyabhichari samyogat rasa nishpattih'^{xix}

The statement has been interpreted by Dr. Manomohan Ghosh thus –

No poetic meaning proceeds (from speech) without (any kind of) sentiment (rasa). Now sentiment is thus produced (rasanishpattih) from a combination (samyoga) of determinants (vibhava), consequents (anubhava) and transitory states (vyabhichari bhavas)^{xx}.

And this constitutes the core of the Rasa Theory of Bharata which explains the aesthetic experience so derived from a work of art as an expression informed by ideal beauty. And Bharata is explicit in pointing out that rasanishpattih leading to rasasvadana or rasanubhuti, is accessible only to the informed spectator, the competent, Pramaatr, Rasika or Sahridaya; for it is the spectator's own energy (utsaha) that is the cause of rasasvadana, the permanent mood (sthayi bhava) so expressed in the artwork, is brought to life as rasa only, and only because of the rasika's own capacity for relishing or rasanubhuti. Thus it follows that, it is absolutely indispensable that the Rasika acquires competence in aesthetic judgement by cultivating certain faculties because, competence depends on purity or singleness (sattva) of mind and on an inner character (antara-dharma) or habit of obedience (anushila) tending to aversion of attention from external phenomena; this character and habit, not to be acquired by mere learning, but either innate or cultivated, depends on an ideal sensibility (vaasanaa) and the faculty of self-identification (yogyataa) with the forms (bhaavana) so depicted (varnaniya). In the end, as Kapila Vatsyayan explains, Rasa becomes the ultimate experience of the creator, the spectator, and the listener alike, all connected by an invisible thread through this very work of Art.^{xxi}

Again, Sri Aurobindo in expounding the national value of Indian Art, emphasizes that the first and lowest purpose or function or utility of Art is purely aesthetic, the second is the intellectual or educative, the third and the highest, the spiritual.

Art being as old as man, the development of artistic sensibilities or the sensitivity towards anything artistic came from observing elements of nature within man's very own environment – a baboon's nest weaving, a bee building its hive, a peacock's dance, rumbling of dark clouds in the sky, crackle of a whip of lightening. And it is from the appreciation of such wonders of nature that artistic and aesthetic sensibility first arose and later, evolved in man.

The cultivation of this aesthetic sensibility is further facilitated and enhanced by intellectual contemplation through the study of language, literature, music, painting, sculpture, dance upon employing interpretive and analytical faculties.

Finally, the education of the arts is aimed towards an inner refinement of the spirit, a conscious process of gradual refinement from one plane to the other through the purification of the 'eye' and the 'ear', the visual and the aural, such that man transcends from the physical to the metaphysical, to arrive at a higher and higher degree of subtlety and refinement.

The Upanishads too, tell us –

'Raso vai sah'^{xxii}

That, Brahman is Bliss itself and therefore, beauty and rasa are synonymous. In truth, in as pure a form as music, beauty reveals itself in response to the aesthetic mind or soul. It is then perhaps appropriate to say,

'Na vidya sangeetat para'^{xxiii}

Meaning, there is no art greater than music, for it is only through music and music alone that man is able to transcend the mundane and reach the Divine. And this communion of the spirit of music with the spirit of Nature, which is the undivided whole consciousness of the One, is the very aim, the very purpose of music.

For, as Bharata puts forward in his Natyashastra, the very purpose of a work of art is to provide both pleasure and education by being a vehicle of beauty, duty and conduct.

And therein lies the ethics of it all because, the practice and performance of Indian Art, whatever be its form, teaches the Artist to find his/her own truth first, and then walk of the path of perseverance in search and research of beauty, of value through the daily ritualistic repetitive actions, gestures and movements, through the solitary journey of creating the tangible Form, in pursuance of the image within, based on past memory, from the intangible Formless; and, through this very process, compels him/her to become aware of duty and conduct, not only towards his/her art but also towards his kin, his society, his people, his land.

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ENDNOTES:

- ⁱ 1. Rowell L. Music and Musical Thought in Early India. Chicago London: The University of Chicago Press; 2015. Chapter 2 The priest saw this world from within, the theatrical producer saw this world from without. Both the priest and the producer were concerned with the pursuit of reality in the midst of the illusions of the *theatrum mundi*, but they approached their tasks from opposite directions and with contrasting values: the contrast between a sacred and a secular worldview, between ascetism and hedonism, between sensory control and sensory surrender, between the pursuit of moksha or liberation, and kaama or pleasure.
- ⁱⁱ 2. Krishnananda S. The Purusha Sukta, Rg Veda 10:90. The Rg Veda. Griffith, Ralph T. H. (1896) A thousand heads hath Purusa, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. On every side pervading earth, He fills a space ten fingers wide.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kumarasambhavam, V, 77
- ^{iv} 3. ed BB. Kalatattvakosha Volume I. New Delhi: IGNC; 2001. Baumer, Kalattavakosa Vol I
- ^v 1. Rowell L. Music and Musical Thought in Early India. Chicago London: The University of Chicago Press; 2015. Chapter 2, Section 2.2, Continuities of Indian Thought
- ^{vi} 4. Coomaraswamy AK. The transformation of Nature in Indian Art. New Delhi: Munsiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd; 2014.
- ^{vii} 5. Wallas G. The Art of Thought. London: Butler and Tanner Ltd; 1926.
- ^{viii} 5. Ibid. Chapter 4 pp 80
- ^{ix} 6. Alice Boner SRS, Bettina Baumer. The Vastu Sutra Upanishad. New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Pvt Ltd; 1996. Formerly there was Brahman (only), the One and the Truth. Through its knowledge, the light within the space of the heart (*antarhrdaya akasha*) is Brahman itself. His knowledge is supreme knowledge.....When in the reflection of an aureole of light Brahman is realised, that is realisation (*prateeta*), the intangible Formless, who is not seen by the eye, by whom the eye sees. That which manifests the experiences in the manner of the relationship between the resemblance and the thing to be known, that is the symbol (*prateeka*). That which in worship bestows bliss, that is the image (*Pratima*), the tangible Form
- ^x 6. Ibid. pp 175
- ^{xi} 7. Vatsyayan K. The Indian Arts: Background and Principles. Silpa Prakasa: Medieval Orissan Sanskrit Text on Temple Architecture. Leiden: E J Brill; 1966. The Chandogya Upanishad {(VIII)-I, 1-3} speaks of the *antarhrdaya akasha* (space in the heart) which represents the totality of the ideal space at the core of our being, wherein one experiences the full content of life. And that essence of life is the realisation of beauty in perfect form, when perfect concord (*samatva*) takes place between the seer and seen.
- ^{xii} 8. Ghose S. Angel of Surplus. Kolkata: Visva Bharati; 2010. What is Art, pp 56-67
- ^{xiii} 9. Kane P. The Sahityadarpan of Vishwanath, 4th Edition. Bombay: Pandurang Vaman Kane; 1956. pp 5
- ^{xiv} 10. Coomaraswamy AK. The transformation of Nature in Indian Art. New Delhi: Munsiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd; 2014. pp 46
- ^{xv} 11. Ibid. pp 49
- ^{xvi} 12. Prajnananda Swami. Music-Its Form, Function and Value. 1979. pp 129
- ^{xvii} 13. The eight sthayi bhavas are – 1] RATI or love 2] HAASYA or mirth 3] KRODHA or anger 4] UTSAHA or courage 5] BHAYA or fear 6] JUJUPSA or aversion 7] VISMAYA or wonder 8] SHOKA or sorrow
- ^{xviii} Prajnananda Swami. Music-Its Form, Function and Value. 1979. pp 1303
- ^{xix} 14. Shastri AM. Natyashastra of Bharatmuni. Varanasi: Benaras Hindu University Press; 1975. Volume I, Chapter 6, V – 31, pp 620
- ^{xx} 15. Ghosh M. The Natyashastra. Calcutta: Manisha Publishers; 1995. Volume I, Chapter VI, pp 81
- ^{xxi} 16. Vatsyayan K. The Square and the Circle in the Indian Arts. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications; 1997. Bharata enunciates yet another path of experiencing the Brahman or Formless, through an elaborate system of impersonalisation by way of which the imagery of the Upanishads is translated into an actual technique of using limbs and organs of the human body and the senses, such that the very language of 'name and form' (*naama and rupa*) evoke that beyond form or without form (*paraarupa and aarupa*), however momentarily.
- ^{xxii} 17. Prajnananda Swami. Music-Its Form, Function and Value. 1979. pp 139
- ^{xxiii} 18. Ibid. pp 107