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AESTHETICS OF INDIAN DANCE

The many genres of Indian dance in different regions of India, in rural and urban *milieus*, simple or sophisticated levels, are governed by a common aesthetics which accounts for an unique continuity and an underlying unity despite the apparent phenomenon of staggering plurality.

The World View:

The aesthetics evolves from a world view which regards the cosmic process as a dance of microcosm and the macrocosm, a rhythmic interplay of eternity and flux in an unending movement of involution, evolution and devolution. Man on earth is one amongst all living matter, is integral to nature. He is in ceaseless dialogue with it. There is no attempt to conquer it. All matter is made of the five elements of water, earth, fire, air and space. Life of Man like the tree and the animal, sprouts from the seed or womb, is manifested in diverse ways, flowers and fruits withers and throws up seeds. The cycle continue unending without beginning and end. Man's distinctiveness lies in his capacity of self-reflection and introspection and the potentiality of conscious awareness that the microcosm of his being (body, mind and consciousness) is a symbol of the processes of the macrocosm. The concept of cyclic time and notions of a still centre which flowers cut specially as petals of a lotus or a hub with spokes of a wheel, each denoting capacity of

expansion of consciousness in a series of concentric circles, all held together within the periphery of a large circumference are fundamental to the world view.

The earliest Indian texts called the *Vedas* articulate the world view as cosmology. *Upaniṣads*, the works of speculative thought systemise the world view as theoretical concepts, and *Brāhmaṇas* (texts of rituals) concretise the concepts through a perfect system of performance, called *yajña* (normally translated sacrifice). The abstract principles of speculative thought are concretised in ritual performance of particular duration in consecrated space: the two are mutually complementary. The first explains cosmic phenomena through verbal metaphor of the tree with roots in heaven or the hub, spokes and wheel; the second recreates in physical time and space, through a system of correspondences where each sound, word, gesture, ritual objects symbolises a total design of the cosmos. The performance demands full community participation. In the *Upaniṣads* evolves the notion of yoga. It denotes the collecting together of all energies (physical and psychical) inward through introspection where revelation can take place: the *yajña* (ritual performance) of the *Brāhmaṇas* make a design in consecrated space through the establishment of a centre and an enclosure and the lighting of three fires in altars which are in the shapes of a square, circle and semi-circle respectively. The ritual acts are a symbolic sacrifice of parts of the body in consecrated time of specific hours or days. In its totality, it is a micro model of the cosmic rhythm. In both, the inner experience as also the outer recreation, harmony, equilibrium tranquillity and harmony are the goal. The first is an inward movement to the centre in silence, the second an outward expansive movement through multi-media expression.

The aesthetics emerged from the world view, the speculative thought and the system of ritual each asserting Man's capacity to reflect, to introspect as also to expand enlarge in space, never forgetting that seed, the flowering and the dying were parts of a single totality of a "life-death-life" continuum. The commitment to wholeness was basic: neither in thought nor in ritual there was absolute value of the single parts. Each was important only in a

framework of inter-relationships within a whole. All life phenomena began from the unmanifest formless sprouted into the multiple subsidiary forms and returned to the formless or beyond form. The Sanskrit words *arūpa* (formless), *rūpa* (form) and *pararūpa* (beyond form) recur in all disciplines. Logically, the theory of aesthetics comprised the key concepts of *yoga* (introspection or an inward movement) and expression in systemised ritual i.e. *yajña* (or outward movement) and the notions of *arūpa* (formless), *rūpa* (form) and *pararūpa* (beyond form).

Fundamental to all these was the view that the individual soul (*ātman*) was constantly aspiring to merge with the universal (the *brahman*). The movement was from the gross to the subtle, from physical to the metaphysical, from the senses to the spirit, all in a continuum and not in polarity. Notions of transmutation, transubstantiation of matter into energy and energy into matter were logical outcomes.

The Theory of Aesthetics:

A theory of aesthetics in first articulated *Nāṭyaśāstra* attributed to a mythical writer Bharata (2nd century B.C. to 3rd century A.D.). However, Bharata neither discusses nor describes the world view or even the aesthetics: he takes both for granted. He only lays down rules of a total multimedia artistic performance through which a state of joy bliss release can be experienced. The theatrical space is for that duration a micro design of the macrocosm it too is consecrated. The plot and the characters are the bridges of communication employing speech, movement, song, costume, as parts of a total design in specific time.

Popularly called the theory of *rasa* (relish i.e. juice fluid, colour) it visualises a total process, comprising first the aesthetic experience of the artist-creator, second the content, form and technique of artistic-creator, second the content, form and technique of artistic expression and third the evocation of an analogous state of aesthetic experience in the spectator and audience. Emerging out of the world outlined above, logically the aesthetic experience is viewed as that state of joy where differentiations cease, all energies

are inward and the artist in that moment has an experience of the whole, the beyond form (*pararūpa*). Unlike any empirical experience, it is trans-mundane and akin to that state of supreme mystical bliss called *brahmānanda*. All duality of subject and object is lost, distinctions of physical time and space are eschewed, the finite and infinite merge. This is the state of *rasa* in the singular, within the creator the artist. This can be theoretically possible only if the individual ego and subjective emotion are transcended, polarities are seen as continuums, pain pleasure are complementary and in opposition. Momentarily, there is the experience of the universal; this is a state of concentration, an approximation of all that is understood by the word *yoga*, a moment of intensity as also release here and now in life. The artist sees in his inward third eye, it is said the white light of luminosity. The problem of art then is to communicate through sound, word, gesture movement, mass volume, line and colour and finite symbols, and dynamic images (*rūpa*, *pratirūpa* i.e. multiple forms) through which in turn the initial aesthetic experience of the artist can be re-created or re-evoked in the heart of an attuned spectator. The work of art is the bridge of communication from the formless, through multiple forms to the beyond form.

Naturally, the content of art cannot be subjectivity or individuality uniqueness: it can only be generalised universal categories. The work of art, its characters, modes of expression are akin to the spectrum of colours of a rainbow. The specific artistic work comprises the finite symbols which can make a design in space in a fixed duration of time through which in the analysis a whole cosmic process can be suggested, be it through an infinitely small icon or of dance or of song of short duration, or a mightily architectonic structure of a temple or a *stupa*. The form and content of art are the counterparts of the methodology of the *yajña* (ritual sacrifice) where parts are related to the whole and energies flow outwards or of the spokes of a wheel from a hub. The arts are multiple radiations from a single centre akin to petals of a flower. Logically, in art, life is abstracted into archetypes of character or what may be termed impersonalised human sentiments and emotions. Now the singular *rasa* is plural *rasas* or more precisely

speaking *bhāvas* (emotive states) divided into eight or nine dominant ones, viz., eroticism (*śṛṅgāra*), pathos or compassion (*karuṇā*), heroism (*vīra*), fierceness (*raudra*), laughter (*hāsya*), fear (*bhaya*), disgust (*vībhatsa*) and wonder (*adbhuta*). To these eight basic states is added a ninth piece "tranquillity" (*śanta*). These are the counterparts of the multiple forms (*pratirūpa*) of speculative thought. Juxtaposed on them are many others largely classified as thirty-three transferable or transient states, called the *sañcāri bhāvas*. For example, love can be expressed by passion or jealousy, passes through phases of separation and yearning, and can culminate in union. The transient emotions are the minute shades of colour, the micro-waves on a dominant basic state. Through the specificity of the archetypal characters, of gods or humans in drama, dance, music, poetry, sculpture and painting, the dominant and the transient or subsidiary are presented. The generalised categories, the archetypes constitute the content of art and govern the form and technique of each of the arts. A series of correspondences are established between a micro-unit of the specific medium (i.e. speech, sound, gesture, mass volume, line, colour, etc.) and a transient states and a dominant state. Each tone or micro tone of sound, each gesture of the human body singly corresponds to an emotive state: in combination a total form evolves aurally and visually with a distinct shape, fragrance colour and taste. This in turn evokes the state of bliss or joy in the spectator i.e. an experience of *rasa* again in the singular suggesting a state of un-differentiation. The work of art becomes an icon to be contemplated both by the creator and the viewer. The three phases are called by the words *rasānubhāva* (experience of *rasa*), the *rasābhivyakti* (expression of *rasa*) and *rasoutapātī* (evocation of *rasa*). Invariably the beginning is the still centre of formless unmanifest, the process that of expression and manifestation through multiple forms and the culmination, the evocation of an analogous experiential state in the spectator. In a word. the dancer is a vehicle, an instrument of communication, the bridge. Yeats inspired by the thought of the *Upaniṣads* sums up the theory of the Indian arts in a line: "who can know the dancer from the dance". The dancer himself or herself becomes the worshiper of the icon of movement created or transmitted through the body.

Abhinavagupta, the most important commentator of the 10th century A.D. explicitly states what Bharata, centuries preceding him, had taken for granted in the following words:

“The artistic creation is the direct or unconventionally expression of a feeling of passion 'generalised', that is, freed from distinctions in time or space and therefore from individual relationships and practical interests, through an inner force of the artistic or creative intuition within the artist. This state of consciousness *rasa* embodied in the poem is transferred to the actor, the dancer, the reciter and to the spectator. Born in the heart of the poet, it flowers as it were in the actor and bears fruit in the spectator”.

“If the artist or poet has the inner force of the creative intuition, the spectator is the man of cultivated-emotion in whom lie dormant the different states of being, and when sees them manifested, revealed on the stage through movement, sound and decor, he is lifted to that ultimate state of bliss known as *ānanda*”.

Made nearly a thousand years ago, these statements are pertinent today for a correct understanding, appreciation and appraisal of the Indian arts, especially dance and music which have enjoyed a remarkable continuity of tradition.

Since the artistic experience was accepted by both the creator and the spectator as an instrument vital for the expansion of the individual, the unique self, towards the Universal Self, and since this experience was again accepted as a discipline of the highest order, both creator and spectator made a special effort to achieve a state of harmony and bliss through the experience. The dancer, the performer, had the creative intuition and the spectator the training and cultivation to achieve this state of harmony. The language that evolved was one of the symbols validated by tradition and conviction dependent for its life breath not on the representation of nature, but on the revealing of underlying truths and beauty of life through suggestion; on the plane of technique (artistic content), the training of the spectator was an essential pre-requisite for any communication which would be heightened experience.

The term used for the spectator, *sahjdaya* (of attuned heart) or the *rasika* (who experiences *rasa*) sums up all the underlying assumptions of such a view. Dormant states of consciousness exist in the spectator, which, once he sees them manifested through the medium of the art, the identical states of being are evoked and awakened within him. The spectator is one of attuned heart and similar disposition who can experience the mood, the sentiment (*rasa*) and who, like the creative artist himself, is capable of experiencing emotion and feeling liberated from the distinctions of time and space.

The practice and performance:

A remarkable continuity of tradition is witnessed in the Indian performing arts. The artist, in a very large measure, continues to consider the artistic experience as a self-discipline of the highest order: the cultivated spectator called *rasika*, shares the world view and aesthetics and firmly believe that the arts are an expression of his finest sensibilities and leads to an experience of the whole, the universal. The artist prepares himself through concentration introspection for the creative moment of release, the spectator prepares himself to experience the dormant feelings lying within him through the artistic performance. The demands on both are exacting.

Logically, the dancer's concern, on the plane of artistic form, is not with his individual self or the human body as such, but with the use of the human instrument in a manner that the universal might be suggested. Designs in space, the treatment of each muscular tension and release, the gestures of hand and eye therefore assumes a significance beyond the immediate and subjective emotions of the particular artist. The dancer believes that, so long as the individual self - the human form - has not been expanded, uplifted, to become an impersonalised universal self, he or she has not attained the state of preparedness for the artistic experience. The inner experience is in silence of the whole and he or she is but the vehicle of communication. The dance is revealed through the body, the dancer is naught and there is no room here for spontaneous overflow of

subjective emotion. The spectator comes to revive the universal, the impersonalised feelings, rather than to respond to the personal, subjective experience of the artist. In classical Indian dance, and music and ritual theatre, the world view and aesthetics provide the solid foundation of the performance and communication. The fulfilling experience of art is when the mystical unseen permeates the community.

Obviously, since the thrill here lies in the unfolding of the known but dormant, and not with the confrontation of the strange, the unique or the highly subjective, the demands made upon the spectator are many and of a different order. The themes constituting the content of the classical dances of India remain the age-old themes of Indian legend, mythology and poetry; the dance, or at least an aspect of it, is highly literary in character and borrows freely from the finished products of Indian poetry. The positions, the stances, the Indian dancer attains are the chiselled poses of Indian sculpture and iconography; the gestures are symbolic and derived from ritual confirmed by tradition and usage; the music and rhythmic patterns forming the musical content of the dance piece are the finished *rāgas* (musical modes) and *tāla* (metrical cycles with specific numbers of unaccented and accented beats, etc.). The sculpturesque, the literary and the musical are fused into the kinetic icons of movements of the dance to suggest the harmonious state of being which each of these arts, singly reiterate.

In the pure dance sequence (called *nr̥tta*), the body is made into a geometrical design. A single motif guides articulation of movement, such as a triangle in the case of *Bharatanāṭyam*, a square in *Kathakali*, a figure of eight in *Manipuri*, a line in *Kathak*. The navel is the centre, symbolic of the cosmic centre, and all movement flows outwards from it and returns to it in frozen stance. In a rigorously structured design, floor space is also covered in the same manner. As in ritual both time and space are consecrated. The movements of the single parts are related to the whole capable of evoking transient or dominant states. In the pantomimic sections (*nr̥tya*) the line of poetry set to music and rendered in a metrical cycle (*tāla*) provides the basis for recreating the myriad spectrum of

emotion on a basic mood: variations and improvisations are presented only to evoke a dominant state of love, velour, pathos, etc. all with the ultimate aim of evoking in the spectator an analogous experience of joy, bliss and release. The specificity of character, these is but an aid for an evocation of the dominant mood and not of absolute value as single parts. The inter-play of stasis and dynamics constitute the dance. Sometimes, for the uninitiated spectator, this dance becomes a highly contextual art form full of bewildering complexity and punctuated by repetition. At the level of meaning and technique, it demands a knowledge and training which apparently does not belong to the visual experience of the dance alone. For the initiated spectator, however, these are the very factors which contribute to his delight. The thrill lies in the unfolding of an experience known to him in works of poetry, music, architecture, and sculpture. The revelation of the familiar plays an important role in the full relish of the aesthetic experience as it presupposes the spectators familiarity with the myths and symbolism and awareness of the stylised sculptured poses, the language of poetry and a knowledge of musical sound and metrical structures.

Variations, interpretations and synchronisations are all built around the pillars of the metrical cycle and the musical mode. The delight of the initiated spectator comes from the prismatic unfolding of the different lights and shades where he can enjoy the recreation of innumerable permutations and combinations on a single myth, theme, a musical mode or a metrical cycle. In the pantomimic sequences, the understanding of the word and the musical note are essentials as the word provides the foundation for the countless varieties of kinetic metaphor. This layering of stylised movement patterns upon repetitive poetic and musical passages constitutes a cardinal principle of the aesthetics of the classical Indian dance. An acquaintance with thematic, poetic, musical composition and sculptural pose at one level is an essential pre-requisite as without it, the spectator is left often on the fringes of aesthetic enjoyment and may not be permeated by the spirit of this art. On the other hand, precisely because the content and formal elements are only parts of a total design, tools of expression of impersonalised state, archetypes

an immediate resonance is evoked transcending the specificity of myth, theme, form and technique. A sensitive spectator who is not looking for the specific meaning and story is transported to another state of uplifted elevation where he experiences an analogous state of joy or bliss, which is trans-mundane and transform. The cycle comes full circle beginning with the formless unmanifest flowering to the multiplicity of the manifest which in turn is the vehicle of the experience of trans-manifest. Stated differently, it is universal and trans-national today. The world-view, the aesthetics, and the performance are multiple layers of an organically knit module of experience, expression and evoked experience. The annihilation of limited self (*ātman*) of the artist makes possible the creative act of the expression of the vaster spectrum of life in art and leads to the expansion of consciousness of both performer and spectator to a larger universal self (*brahman*). The residual taste after return to mundane life is a sense of harmony and tranquillity.