



INTERPRETING 'ART' IN THE LANGUAGE OF SRI AUROBINDO

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Abstract

Sri Aurobindo, the sage of the preceding millennium, is a multifaceted personality. Apart from his spiritual and philosophical vision of life, the intellectual ferment of this yogi knows no bounds. His 'Evening Talks' with his disciples as recorded by his close associate A.B.Purani in two spells, one between 1923 and 1926 and the other between 1938 and 1943, cover a wide range of subjects marked by his extraordinary scholarship and proven authority over the subjects. The highlight of this informal dialogue acquires typical significance because the contents of the conversation were not meant for publication at the time of discussion. The authors have taken art 'as an intertwined exposition of creativity right through the history from the vedic period. The underlining calm strength' becomes the necessary pre-requisite for any meaningful creativity. The illustrations from the Vedas and the Upanishads are taken to strengthen the argument. Painting as an art forms the crux of the discussion and is interpreted by cross examining different schools of painting like Ajanta, Rajputana etc., The art criticism of Cezanne and Matisse are taken for comparison with the native art. The works of Marie Corelli and Victoria Cross are discussed for interpreting the dimensions of the Indian Art. The conclusive critique gives a holistic perception of Indian Art.

Keywords: 'Calm Strength', Ajanta, Rajput Painting, Cezanne, Matisse.

INTRODUCTION

The Spiritual Guru Sri. Aurobindo, is hailed as one of the greatest sons of the preceding millennium whose multiple facets of personality as a nationalist, a polygot, a philosopher and a messiah of universal peace and harmony, needs no introduction. A natural genius like him whose understanding of different areas of knowledge is astoundingly very great against the backdrop of his extensive reading and vision of a great yogin as recorded by one of his close disciples A.B. Purani and later published under the title 'The Evening Talks'. They were catergorised under two periods: the first segment pertains to the period between 1923 and 1926 and the second segment belongs to the period between 1938 and 1948¹. The contents of his conversation with the spiritual master cover a vast period of eleven years with a gap of twelve years between the two recordings. The interesting component of the entire process becomes more absorbing since the dialogue is rendered in an informal catechism over a wide range of subjects. One of his casual talks on "the art" is now taken for analysis to prove the deep scholarship displayed by the master. It becomes further historically significant since the contents were not meant for publication at the time of disposition. As such we cannot see any conscious effort to make it look artificially intellectual. Hence it ought to become more reliable and valid for interpretation. The entire treatment is limited only to what he said on the subject. The nexus between art and literature is explained with both oriental and western illustrations wherever necessary and suitable. To highlight the argument critical interpretations are appended very cautiously to avoid any digression.

SPIRITUALITY

Sri. Aurobindo asserts that the past is reflected in spirituality arts and poetry and they have become unquestionable because of their 'calm strength' from within². He adds that the Upanishads are not challenged so far because of this intrinsic merit. The hidden power of 'yoga' is also to highlight this inner strength and one should be careful not to expose 'sadhana' too much to the demoralising spirit of the vital world. As a corollary, what we can add what Wordsworth said about poetry as 'emotions distilled in tranquillity'. When this basic requirement is vitiated, it tends to become 'falsehood'. In other words, art is no more genuine and is corrupted by malific influence of the vital universe. He adds that wherever sadhana 'gives opening to the material world, it shall precisely destroy a spirit of truth by annihilating 'calm strength' and in essence it turns into falsehood.

LANGUAGE AND UPANISHADS

For the purpose of argument we are restricting only to the Hindu view of art as most of the representations are taken only from it. If you trace the history of art of the ancient period from Vedic period, it is essentially practical. There is no reference to painting and sculpture. But the carpenter, metal worker, potter and weaver provided efficiently for all requirements.³ Thus vedic aesthetic essentially consisted in the appreciation of the skill.⁴ The keynote of the 'Age of Upanishad' and Pali Buddhism stand for truth; No doubt the language of the Upanishads combined austerity with patience when for example in



the 'Brihadaranayaka Upanishad'⁵, 'the bliss of atman' or the intuition of self is compared with the happiness of earthly lovers in 'self-forgetting' dalliance.⁶

AESTHETIC EMOTION

The later Hindu view of art treats it as a form of yoga and identifies aesthetic emotion with that and the self perceives it as such. It means achieving of harmony or unity of consciousness.⁷ This is what Sri. Aurobindo too insists when he says that the innate power of yoga as a form of art is capable of recreating the identical experience as experienced by the artists and then only any form of art becomes full and complete and unchallengeable.⁸ In any form of art whether Indian or alien, this commonality beholds this innate quality. It makes no difference between Michael Angelo, Raphael and Picasso in bringing out the unity of consciousness.⁹

THEME OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Thus the underlining theme becomes all in all for the artists and if there is beauty in his work, it does not arise from wilful aesthetic intention but from a state of mind which is found in from unconscious expression. In sheer rustic expression, we often say that one has to feel any art form to appreciate it. The famous art critic Ananda Coomaraswamy adds what 'Sukaracharya' said in his book, 'The Dance of Siva' as follows "Even the misshapen image of God is to be preferred to the image of a man however charming and full". Accordingly the conviction is preferred to prettiness since it born out of consciousness. As such, the beginning of Hindu art goes back to the second or third century B.C. In the primitive painting, the idea of man in the mind of artist is very important than the man they saw. Technically it sounds obscure and Sri. Aurobindo concurs with the significance of 'idea' in ancient art form and refutes the criticism by Rogerfry¹⁰ who says that there is no idea in the early art form. Apart from a few coins little or nothing is preserved of the earlier period and the recorded history starts with 4th century A.D. The next four centuries is regarded as the period of the Golden Age of Indian Civilization. After the 9th and 10th centuries there is a general though not certainly universal decline in orthodox art.

SRI AUROBINDO AND PAINTING

According to Sri. Aurobindo, the old form of painting heavily leaned on 'grandeur' and the recent form of painting has its own finer and delicate elements.¹¹ Even the misconception that there is gulf between Ajanta and Rajput Schools of Painting is broken when he argues that other supposedly distinct paintings of the Nepalese, the Tibetians, and the Central Asian do have the continuity with Indian painting.¹² If these geographically distant localities can claim proximity with our local schools of painting it becomes imperative that the native schools of painting should have continuity and unity among themselves.¹³

The master further goes to explain a few basic components of the painting chronologically.¹⁴ The movement from the earlier period to the later period is accompanied by a transparent transition from the potent of grandeur to the essence of 'conscious and vital'.¹⁵ He interpolates the idea of 'Chaitya Guru'¹⁶ the divine portion of it is direct in the human and it persists simultaneously in 'chitta'.¹⁶ It is better to draw an analogy with what Ananada Coomaraswamy describes about the classical example of Rajput paintings which is romantic. Even there, the theme is predetermined literature and these pictures though they are not illustrations in their respective sense of the world, are pictures for verses just as much as Ajantha painting or the Beliefs of 'Borobudur Monument'¹⁷.

Thus one can find a perfect agreement with the two critics who accepted that there was a central theme in the ancient painting and the artistry was subsumed in it and in its full expression it is bound to be aesthetic.¹⁸ Sri. Aurobindo all of a sudden refers to Gangooly's description of art in the magazine 'Rupam' who refers to 'mithuna' – a pair of male and female figures being kept in the temples of India¹⁹. It implies 'purusha and prakrithi' aspect without which there is no creation. As Gangooly was aware of the mastery of Sri. Aurobindo on art, he wanted to him to recast a chapter on architecture and sculpture. Sri. Aurobindo, obliged with his critique on sculpture architecture and painting not as a rebuttal to what William Archer had written about it.²⁰ He classified the paintings under the works of art from the vital world as typified in the album of Abanindranath and puranic paintings as rendered by Nandalal.²¹

The latter reflects a strong mental conception while the former concentrates on the vital world.²² The criticism further goes deep when Sri. Aurobindo says that the early painting of Abanindranath belongs to Kagara style²³ as exemplified by his Krishanaleela paintings. He sums up saying that arts in general and poetry and paintings in particular belong to vital plane. Ananda Coomaraswamy adds that tender humanism and the preferred nature sympathies which are so very dominant in the paintings of Ajanta and sculptures of Mamallapuram are equally recognisable in the work of poets like Asvagosha and



dramatis like Kalidasa.²⁴ Thus the unities of art form which superficially appear to be disjointed have underlining connectivity by common consciousness notwithstanding the various classifications which are only peripheral and technical in nature.²⁵ It is not to undermine the nuances of structural components and stylistic elements in art but only to highlight the higher significance of intrinsic consciousness.

IDENTITY OF ART

Sri. Aurobindo gives total freedom to the artist in his creation to suit his imagination but there should be concordance between what the artist said and the audience perceived otherwise it will be end up in gross injustice both to the artist and the art together.²⁶ He quotes the argument of surrealists for whom the world of art need not mean anything but such a view is an extreme abstraction of the very purpose of creation of any work of art, He cautions that the artist should work within his own conditions and limitations without losing the identity and continuity of art.

He quotes the idea of Elie Faure, the famous French art critic who lamented that the French have sacrificed their architectural continuity of five hundred years at the cost of securing the first position in painting in Europe and in their endeavour they succeeded by losing their architectural continuity.²⁷ The precise line of argument is that wherever modifications are done to suit the changing trends there is always the danger of losing exclusive identity pride and past legacy. Sri. Aurobindo is thus cautious not to allow any form of art to perish in an attempt to achieve new recognition. He takes the example of Michael Angelo's Mona Lisa whose universality of appeal is not in the lines and colours alone but in the immortal mood conveyed through her smile. The sense of sadness reflected in the art form as visualized by the artist is exactly received by all the onlookers and it makes this form of art very special.

SRI AUROBINDO AND POETRY

Sri. Aurobindo now shifts to poetry of Rabindranath Tagore whose works are either from vital or vital-mental plane.²⁸ He compares it with the work of Marie Corelli, whose spiritual stories were never read by the popular public. By contrast erotic novels of Victoria Cross were very popular and well received and ironically she rated herself with Shakespeare as the only two great literary personalities.²⁹ He takes the example of a committed novelist like Walter Scott. In his novel 'Bride of Lammermoor', a mother character does not approve the love of her daughter and forces her to marry someone else to maintain the honour of their family status. This is to show self-control and regulation displayed by the creator in the work of his art.

SRI AUROBINDO AS YOGI

The yogic philosopher describes the modern cult of impressionism in painting.³⁰ The painters of this school try to convey the impression by mass of colour and do not require any design. The impression is really conveyed by emotions from the artist to others as the artist has all the liberty to take all that he wants from nature for this purpose. Sri. Aurobindo further describes the most modern trend of the artistic movement in Europe in the paintings of Cezanne³¹. His portraits are remarkable, fine and showed power. Equally he appreciates the works of Matisse³². In the same way he criticises that there are three things in common in all modern art; ugliness, coarseness or vulgarity or absurdity.

CONCLUSION

Sri. Aurobindo sums up that vision and experience are the creative elements of Indian Art. To establish this perception he has taken into account a long survey of both Indian and Western Art forms specifically painting and literature through the ages. The elements of unity and continuity in any art form and the subtle variations have been graphically brought out. If a casual and a perfunctory evening talk can bring out so much of scholarly information on a variety of subjects discussed, we can very well imagine the extent of depth and analytical frame work of those areas of knowledge where he had intended purpose.

REFERENCES

1. A. B. Purani (Recorder), Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo, 4th ed., Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Puducherry, 2007, pp 12-13.
2. Ibid., P.221.
3. The Dance of Siva-Fourteen Indian Essays, The Sunwise Town, Inc. 2 East 31st Street, New York, 1918, P.18.
4. The Upanishads are a collection of Philosophical texts which form the theoretical basis for the Hindu Religion. They are known as Vedanta and belong to early centuries of B.C.



5. Pali Buddhism – ‘Sacca’ is a Pali word that means real or true. It is often used in the context of the Four Noble Truths. Pali is a middle-Indo Aryan language (of Prakrit group). It was popular in the early Buddhist period. See also: Ananda Coomaraswamy, Op.cit., P.19.
6. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says that whole is all that. The whole is all this. It is one of the primary Upanishads and is a commentary on Purushsukta of the Vedas. See also: Ananda Coomaraswamy, Ibid.
7. Micheal Angelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni an Italian Renaissance Painter and Sculpture, Architect, Print and an engineer - (1475-1564) – Paintings on the roof Chapel Sistine, Sculpture of St. David are important.
8. Raffaello Sanjio de Urbino – (1483-1520) – Italian Painter and Architect of the High Renaissance Period.
9. Picasso – Pablo Picasso – Spanish Painter, Sculpture, Printmaker, Ceramist and Stage designer – Spent his life in France – Best works in Painting : The weeping woman, The Old Guitarist.
10. Roger Fry – Roger Eliot Fry (1866-1934). English art critic and artist – He is often called the champion of the movement called ‘Post Impressionism’ – Published Popular Books like Giovanni Bellini (1899) Joshua Reynolds’ Discourses, Articles on the works of Paul Ce’zanne, Paul Gangin, Henri Matisse and Vincent Van Gogh.
11. ‘Ajanta’ – Paintings – found on the Ajanta Caves based on the episodes drawn from the life of Buddha – These Paintings reflect Jataka Stories – Later Gupta period to the Early Chalukya Period – 5th to 7th Centuries AD – Maharashtra – 30 Rockcut Buddhist Carve Monuments.
12. Rajput School of Painting – They are more remarkable but even there, the theme is pre-determined in literature and the pictures through they are not illustrations in the representative sense of the world are pictures for versus. They are also known as Rajasthani Painting which flourished in 18th century in the Royal courts of Rajaputane. It has four principal schools of Mewar, Maewar, Hadoti and Dhunder.
13. The Nepali Art – ancient i con and religious paintings entered the valley during the Lichchavi period in the middle of 5th Century AD – Murals or Wall-Paintings of this period are not extant but are referred by Weng Husan Tse of 7th Century Ad.
14. The Tibetan Art – Mahayanist influence in art from 4th century BC – Deity Chenrezig as thousand armed saint is popular Tantric and Bon influences are also seen in their art form.
15. The Central Asian Art – Cerpian sea to china and from Afghanistan to Russia one can see the prevalence of Buddhist influence here.
16. A.B. Purani, Op.cit., P.222.
17. Barobudur Monument or Barabudur is a 9th Century Mahayang Buddhist temple in Mageleng, Central Java, Indonesia.
18. Gangooly was running a magazine in art called ‘Rupam’ in West Bengal – He was an art critic, a contemporary of Sri Aurobindo.
19. Ananda Coomaraswamy, Op.cit., P.223.
20. William Archer born at Perth (1856-1924) lived in London and became a Scottish critic.
21. Abanindranath 1871-1951 started the Bengal School of Art Movement – Creator of ‘Indian Societies Oriental Arts – Modern Indian Painting.
22. 1882-1966 Nandalal Bose – Student of Abanindrath – India School of Paintings.
23. Kagra Style – Pictorial Art of Kangra in Himachal Pradesh in 18th Century – Voluminous Paintings in Content. They belong to Patari Paintings (School) and Art at Gulu, Kulu, Chambe, Nurpur, Bilapur.
24. Mamallapuram – Ancient historic part paintings of South Indian the Pallavas – Historic Moments from 7th to 9th centuries.
25. Asvagosha – Famous Non-Buddhish Yogi in Nagarjuna. His fifty verses of Guru Devotion is important – about sixth century BC.
26. Kalidasa – 5th Century AD, renowned Sanskrit writer of Poetry.
27. Elie Faure - (1873-1937) French Art Historian and an Essayist.
28. Marie Corelli – Spiritual Novelist.
29. Victoria Cross (1868-1952) Annie Sophie Cory – Wrote exotic novels under Pseudo name Victoria Cross.
30. Impressionism, 19th Century Art Movement based in Paris – Artists famous in 1870s & 1880s – Unconcentrated.
31. Cezanne (1839-1906) – Paul Czanne was a French Artist and Post-impressionist Painter.
32. Matisse (1869-1954) – Henri Emile Benot Matisse – French Artist – Draughtsman, Printmaker, Sculpture and Popular Painter. Important works: The Dance Woman with a Hat, The Dessent Harmony.