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## ASPECTS OF HIGHER INDIAN AESTHETICS

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**ASPECTS OF HIGHER INDIAN AESTHETICS**

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**LECTURE I**

*Introduction*

The terms of the endowment require that the lectures should deal with any aspect of Indian philosophy. The subject chosen for the present lectures belongs to an area which until recent times was comparatively neglected, namely the aesthetics of India. Conventionally, aesthetics is concerned with beauty in the familiar fields of nature and art. But these lectures will be dealing with the application of the concept of beauty in a realm which is beyond common experience. Since such an application goes beyond the conventional scope of aesthetics, it has been referred to here as 'higher aesthetics'.<sup>1</sup> This division of aesthetics may be conceived of in two aspects. One relates to the universe, comprising the whole world of matter and the entire class of souls. This will be the theme of the first lecture and will be presented under the title 'Cosmic Beauty'. The other aspect relates to the ultimate reality. And this will be treated of in the second lecture under the head 'Divine Beauty'.

In Indian philosophy the possibility of applying the concept of beauty beyond the familiar realms of nature and art exists only from the point of view of Vedānta, as we shall show in the sequel. Hence the special standpoint from which the subject is offered is that of Vedānta. To avoid any possible misunderstanding, it is necessary to clarify that the term Vedānta is being used here in its wide sense as



standing for a whole tradition and not for any particular school or schools. Taken in this sense, the term Vedānta represents all those schools of Hindu philosophy which are in accord with the basic teaching of the Upaniṣads, whether they are directly derived from the Upaniṣads or not.

The central teaching of the Upaniṣads is that the whole of the physical world and the entire class of souls are in some sense or other dependent on an ultimate reality. Passage II, 5, 15 of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, for instance, compares the dependence of everything in the universe on Brahman to the dependence of the spokes of a wheel on its rim and hub. Drawing their inspiration from the Upaniṣads, all the Vedānta schools stand together and contrasted from all the other schools by their common firm recognition of a central reality underlying the whole universe of matter and souls. It is only the exact nature of Brahman and the manner of dependence which the souls and nature bear to Brahman that constitute the points of difference among the schools of Vedānta.

Some of the Śaiva schools, e.g. Śaiva-siddhānta and Kāśmīra Śaivism, have their source in the Śaiva Āgamas. If these Āgamas are regarded as belonging to the *smṛti* class of scripture, the indirect connection of these schools with the Upaniṣads is evident. Even if these Āgamas are considered as independent of the Upaniṣads in their origin, they are, as the Śaiva schools themselves admit, quite in accordance with the basic teaching of the Upaniṣads. All the schools of Hinduism which follow the Upaniṣads in spirit if not in letter may be regarded as Vedānta. Thus the term Vedānta is being used here in respect of the pattern of thought and not with regard to source.

We shall now proceed to deal with the first of the two aspects of higher Indian aesthetics mentioned already.

### *Cosmic Beauty*

When we speak of beauty in nature, we ordinarily mean beauty in one or other part of nature. It may be beauty in an object such as a landscape or beauty in an event such as sun-rise. The whole of nature is not open to our experience. But the philosophy of Vedānta provides for an order of beauty which pertains not only to the whole of nature but to the whole universe (*prapañca*), which comprises the physical



realm (*jagat*) and the realm of souls (*jīva*). The basis of such an aesthetic concept is in the metaphysics of Vedānta. We shall therefore first devote some attention to that metaphysical foundation, which is found in the Upaniṣads.

The Upaniṣads, taking their stand on the central doctrine that everything in the universe is rooted in Brahman, regard the universe as a well-integrated whole. The universe is no doubt unimaginably multifarious. But since the one basic reality binds all things at bottom, things are in essential harmony with one another. There is physical as well as moral order in the universe. Nothing is out of place or discordant with another in the grand scheme of Brahman. All strife and disharmony are only for the surface view of things. When the universe is understood as centred on Brahman, the so-called natural calamities and moral evils become part of the cosmic design. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* passage VIII, 4, 1 says that the Ātman is the dike, the embankment for the safety of the worlds and that all evils turn back from the Ātman. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* passage III, 8, 9 is an inviting description of how there is physical and moral order in the universe because of Brahman. It describes how under the rule of the Immutable Brahman the sun and the moon, heaven and the earth maintain their positions (in space), how moments, days, and nights, seasons and years are held in their respective places (in time), and how rivers flow in set directions. It describes, again, how (on the moral plane) under the control of the same Immutable One men come to praise those that give, how the devas depend on the sacrificer and the manes on certain oblations.

The genesis of the Upaniṣadic conception of universal order is to be found even in the Mantras, where the gods are described as 'guardians of *ṛta*'. The term *ṛta*, which stands for the regularity of things in nature, also means moral righteousness, so that the gods are regarded as upholders of the physical and moral order of the universe.<sup>2</sup>

At this stage a clarification is necessary. We remember that the Upaniṣads present two views of Brahman, the cosmic and the acosmic (*saprapañca* and *niṣprapañca*). In the first, the universe is treated as real but as dependent on Brahman. In the second the universe is reduced to Brahman, which then emerges as the sole reality. The question of reconciling the two views—which is the bone of contention among the Vedānta schools—is not our present concern. All that we have to



note is that the concept of cosmic order is obviously based on the *sapraṇāṇica* view of Brahman, precisely because there can be no question of such order unless the universe characterized by diversity is taken to be real: subordinated to Brahman but not negated in Brahman.

This idea of cosmic order is special to Vedānta because of its emphasis on a central principle which unites the whole universe. Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Yoga recognize the existence of God, but the way in which the concept is fitted into the scheme of realities is too loose to effect a unity. The Sāṅkhya, Mīmāṃsā, Jaina, and Teravāda Bauddha schools provide no place for the idea of a Supreme Being. The deification of the Buddha in Mahāyāna Buddhism under the concept of *trikāya* serves the purpose of a saviour of souls but not of a controller of all things including the material. And the concept of *ālaya-vijñāna* in Vijñānavāda may somewhat resemble the acosmic view of Brahman in the Upaniṣads, but in that view, as we have seen, the question of cosmic order does not arise, the universe having been reduced to the one reality. Consequently, these schools confine their attention to laws in specific areas, such as the principle of *adṛṣṭa* in Mīmāṃsā ethics, of evolution and involution in Sāṅkhya cosmology, of dependent origination in Buddhist ontology, and of *karma* in the ethics of all of them; but in none of them is there a universal principle of unity.

Having outlined the nature of the harmony underlying the universe, we may proceed to discuss to whom it is presented. It is clear that it is not apparent to us in common experience. In our ordinary view of things we often come across disjointed and even conflicting particulars. Such an experience is only natural because of the incapacity of our minds to grasp anything more than fragments of the universe. At the most, we may claim to have an innate sense of universal order. That is perhaps what impels us to search for the laws of nature in different fields and also long for social solidarity. In recent times we have even begun to speak in terms of ecological balance, the inter-dependence between life and the environment, and exhibit anxiety to preserve it. But beyond these distant signs of universal order, we have no clear insight into that inner arrangement. We may read about it in scripture. Based on scripture, we may also speculate on it. But we have no direct experience of it.



While our knowledge of cosmic harmony can thus only be mediate, the Upaniṣads declare that the knowledge of it is immediate in the case of one who has realized Brahman, the liberated one. For to know Brahman is to comprehend the universe in its entirety as asserted by more than one Upaniṣad.<sup>3</sup> Brahman being the basis of cosmic unity, to experience Brahman is to experience also that unity. Obviously, the reference to the liberated one in this context is to the one who is said to be liberated even while tenanted a body, the *jīvanmukta*, and not to the one who is described as *videhamukta*, liberated on the expiry of the body. The concept of unity in the cosmos has no meaning without assuming the existence of the universe with all its diversity. Hence the liberated person under question is one who, like us, perceives the diversity present in the universe, but, unlike us, is not disturbed by its apparent contradictions, having been firmly established in its central reality.<sup>4</sup> This is the *jīvanmukta*.

Incidentally, it may be mentioned that, although among the Vedānta schools the concept of *jīvanmukti* is recognized in an actual sense only by Advaita, it is admitted at least in a virtual form by the other schools of Vedānta. For they conceive of a stage of perfection in life which is as good as being released. He who has had the vision of God in life through adequate preparation for it is on the threshold of release, waiting only for the body to fall off for attaining actual release. To such a one schools like Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita also apply the term *jīvanmukta*, though figuratively.

To return to our main point, by virtue of his grounding in Brahman, the *jīvanmukta* experiences the resolution of all conflict, the peace and concord that underlies the diverse aspects of the universe. Such an experience spontaneously manifests itself in the life of the *jīvanmukta* as illustrated in many passages of the *Bhagavad-gītā*.<sup>5</sup> The serene smile which uniformly plays on the face of the *jīvanmukta* and the love which he bestows on all beings alike, like a flower spreading its fragrance, are signs of his direct contact with the inner harmony of the universe.

We have so far been concerned with the metaphysics of Vedānta with special reference to its world-view as a preparation for the aesthetic concept of cosmic beauty. We shall now deal with this aesthetic concept.



If we employ the language of aesthetics, the inner harmony of the universe, which we have set forth so far, may be described as its *beauty*. Such a description would not be inappropriate if we consider the view of beauty held in classical Indian thought. Beauty is said to consist in the harmonious relationship of all the parts or aspects of an object. Ānandavardhana describes the beautiful (*cāruṇa*) as one having a charm consisting in perfect union of graceful and proper (parts) (*lalitocita-sanniveśa*).<sup>6</sup> If, then, beauty consists in the harmonious arrangement of all the qualities in an object, we may be permitted to describe the harmony that resides at the heart of the universe as *cosmic beauty*.

The beauty of the universe taken as a whole is different from and transcends the beauty with which we are familiar in the individual parts of nature such as in a mountain or in a rainbow. We may cite as an analogy the distinction made by Ānandavardhana between the beauty of the suggested element in poetry, which is its soul, and the particulars of expression, representing the various parts of its body. The beauty of the suggested meaning is not only different from but shines above the beauty of the various parts of expression (*avayavāntiriktam*).<sup>7</sup> Likewise the beauty that belongs to the whole universe is different from and surpasses the beauty in any part of it.

This transcendental order of beauty represented by universal harmony is, as we have already noted, present constantly in the experience of the *jīvanmukta*. Among aestheticians in India, those who were influenced by Vedānta believe that the same harmony is presented to the experience of great artists<sup>8</sup> also, though in occasional flashes whenever they are under the influence of the finer aspects of the world and life. Among artists, poets sometimes give vocal expression to this unique joyful experience. 'Oh, grant me my prayer that I may never lose the bliss of the touch of the one in the play of the many', exclaims Tagore in the *Gītāñjali* (v. 63). The statement bears witness to two things: one that the poet *does* get such an experience, the other that the experience is but temporary. In so far as the artist shares the experience of the *jīvanmukta*, he has been rightly compared to the latter. The term *kavi*, which usually stands for the poet, is used also for the seer, as in the *Bhagavad-gītā* passage X, 37 (*kavīnāṁ uśanā kavīḥ*). The term *kavi* as standing for the seer is explained by Ācārya Śaṅkara in



his commentary on this *Gītā* passage as *krānta-darsin*—one who sees far ahead. The same meaning could apply to the poet. As Hiriyanṇa observes, ‘... *kavi* literally means “one that shows” and he who shows must necessarily have himself seen.’ What applies to the poet is indeed true of the masters of all fine arts.

There is no doubt that the artist’s vision of cosmic unity is temporary while that of the seer is permanent. This is because while the seer’s vision is the result of complete transformation of personality through the realization of Brahman, the artist’s vision is not the product of such a transformation, but is purely in the nature of a gift. Yet, in so far as he shares the experience of the seer, though on a provisional scale, the artist is superior to us who miss even that experience in the rush and concerns of our lives. Therefore the service that the artist can do for us is immense. Through his work he gives us intimations of that ultimate harmony of which he has glimpses in moments of exaltation.

According to the same interpretation, it is these glimpses of cosmic harmony that form the inspiration for the artist’s creative endeavour. The result is that whatever aspect of nature or life he chooses as his theme, the artist is able to produce perfect harmony of parts and aspects in his work—a veritable symbol of the real harmony behind. This is one of the implications of comparing the artist with the Creator (*Prajāpati*) himself, a comparison which is often found in Indian works on aesthetics. It may be a harmony of words and ideas as in poetry, of sounds as in music, of gestures as in dance, of lines and colours as in painting or of shapes and sizes as in sculpture and architecture. And it is this unique harmony of the product—the like of which we cannot expect to find in our ordinary view of the universe—that endows art with a special charm. Thus, whatever be the theme of his work, and whatever medium he employs, the artist vouchsafes to us in subtle form his own lessons of the cosmos.

The question may now be asked whether this idea of the cosmos as an integrated whole, apart from being present behind works of art as their model and inspiration, and thus being impressed on the theme, can itself become the theme of art. Can the artist represent cosmic unity as his subject-matter just as he represents some aspect of



nature or life? It seems that there are two difficulties against such a possibility.

One is that the unity that we refer to at the cosmic level transcends the artist's means of communication. It is not a partial unity of aspects in the physical world or in social life as represented by the laws of nature and morality. It is a comprehensive spiritual unity of which the unifying principle is Brahman. The artist, on the contrary, has to create through some form of material medium, be it subtle as in poetry and music or gross as in sculpture and architecture.

The other difficulty is that the ultimate harmony in question is unfamiliar to the appreciator. We at this end may form at the most some sort of abstract idea about it, but not being equipped to verify it in experience, it remains for us a distant vague notion. What we are familiar with is the realm of particular objects and events, natural and human, which are not entirely free from conflicts. It is to such an audience that an artist has to address himself, though his act of creation is spontaneous. Therefore, however lofty his theme, the artist has to express himself in the language of objects and events to be received by us.

For these reasons, it is by no means easy to represent the cosmic harmony as such in art. However, even within the limitations indicated, the artist sometimes does succeed in communicating closer lessons of that harmony than distantly represented by the general structure of his work. He may achieve this in specific areas of his work through appropriate transformation and adjustment of material which only a genius can achieve. We shall refer to just two instances, one from drama and the other from sculpture, which convey in vivid ways how things hang together.

In the Fourth Act of the *Śākuntala* Kālidāsa describes the moving farewell accorded to Śākuntala by the hermitage to which she had endeared herself from childhood. To the poet's mind the hermitage is a whole range of relationship, not confined to humans. The beasts and birds and plants and even the elements of nature express a link far deeper than we can ever discern in our commonplace environs. Even the wise and detached Kaṇva has to compose himself in the position of a parent. No wonder he entreats the trees served by his daughter to



grant her leave. An ethereal voice invokes the comfort of the elements on her path, the stunned antelopes drop from their mouths half-eaten grass, the peacocks quit dancing, the faded leaves fall off creepers like tears, and the pet orphaned fawn clings to Śakuntala's garment even as she begins to move.

The other example is one among the scenes sculptured on rock sides at Mahābalipuram, the scene popularly known as Arjuna's penance.<sup>10</sup> A narrow fissure between two large boulders is skilfully represented as a river through the inclusion of Nāgas and Nāgis, demi-gods associated with water. Near the wedge stands a figure on his left foot engaged in severe penance. The spot chosen by him is holy by the presence of Śiva and Viṣṇu, of sages engaged in deep meditation, and of their disciples carrying out their rituals. Rows of celestials speed towards the central figure attracted by his penance. And a host of animals of various kinds gather at the spot as if bound by a common bond. The deer rests at ease near the lion and the rats frolic around a dozing cat.

## LECTURE II

### *Divine Beauty*

The topic of this lecture follows from the one presented in the first. It was pointed out that the basis of the assertion by the Vedānta tradition that the universe is harmonious is its doctrine that everything rests on Brahman. Now, since the cosmic beauty has its source in Brahman, the tradition of Vedānta has come to regard Brahman itself as the ultimate in beauty.

The conception of Brahman in aesthetic terms is specially found in the Itihāsas and Purāṇas, but the idea is not absent in the Upaniṣads. Although the term 'beauty' (*saundarya*) does not itself occur in the Upaniṣads in the description of Brahman, a term which is closely allied to it, namely 'bliss' (*ānanda*) is used for denoting Brahman. It occurs along with the terms *sat* and *cit*. In describing Brahman as *sat*, the Upaniṣads convey that Brahman is the basis of the external world, and in applying the term *cit*, they signify that the same Brahman is also the basis of the knower. In referring to Brahman as *ānanda*, the



Upaniṣads teach that the ultimate reality is also the ultimate value, the final goal of man. Man seeks everlasting and complete bliss above all, and Brahman is that bliss. Hence the realization of Brahman constitutes *mokṣa*.

Now, although it is the term 'bliss' and not the term 'beauty' that occurs in the Upaniṣads, the connection of this term with the idea of beauty will be evident if we consider the conception of beauty in classical India. Beauty is an idea which cannot easily be understood without taking into account the unique pleasure which it gives to the observer. From the point of view of the object we may at the most say that its beauty consists in the harmony of all its features. But the nature of this harmony cannot be indicated except by referring to the fact that it is such as to transport the onlooker to an order of delight superior to the delight coming from other sources such as sense gratification or sleep. This is the reason why some aestheticians in India prefer to describe beauty in terms of the unique joy which it yields. Jagannātha, for instance, describes it thus: 'beauty is that the apprehension of which produces transworldly delight' (*ramaṇīyatā ca lokottarāhlādajanakajñānagocaratā*).<sup>11</sup> If we remember the close connection between beauty and the best of bliss, it is not difficult to see that the conception of Brahman in terms of beauty is not without a foundation in the Upaniṣads.

Another term which lends further encouragement to this claim is 'love' (*priya*), which the Upaniṣads use in connection with Brahman. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* Brahman represented as the true essence of man and designated Ātman is described as the ultimate and sole object of love.<sup>12</sup> Whatever other object is loved is in reality loved for the sake of the Ātman in it.<sup>13</sup> Love for something implies loveliness in it, the presence of attractive, or lovable, qualities in harmonious blend, in short, exquisite beauty. If we could release the term 'loveliness' from its naive conception of physical attractiveness and think of loveliness at higher levels—mental, and further, spiritual—it is not impermissible to think of the highest self, or Brahman-Ātman as lovely, or beautiful. Indeed it should be the most lovely because the text cited asserts that Brahman is the final and the only object of love.

Thus, although the Upaniṣads do not themselves evolve an aesthetic conception of Brahman, they do prepare the ground for its



development in the Itihāsas and Purāṇas. The Itihāsas and Purāṇas make full use of this conception to promote devotion to God as a means to salvation which even the weak can practise. Brahman as the object of devotion is the Supreme Person possessing infinite auspicious attributes. He is Bhagavān, or Īśvara. The perfect union of all excellences in him constitutes his beauty, by virtue of which he steals the hearts of his devotees. Such a conception forms an inexhaustible theme for the Itihāsas and Purāṇas. The personal conception of Brahman, to which the concept of beauty applies, becomes the central teaching of the theistic schools of Vedānta. But it is not exclusive to theistic Vedānta; it occupies a place of great practical importance in Advaita Vedānta. Hence we shall be dealing with the aesthetic view of Brahman with reference to all Vedānta.

The beauty of Brahman may be conceived of at two levels—abstract and concrete. At the abstract level Brahman is referred to as the ultimate in beauty. The *Śrīmad-bhāgavata* describes him as *bhuvana-sundara* <sup>14</sup> The expression may be translated as 'the Beauty of the Universe' (*bhuvanānāṁ sundaraḥ*) or as 'the one peerless Beauty in all the three worlds' (*bhuvaneṣu sundaraḥ*). Since the entire universe rests in Brahman, all orders of beauty, whether they be in parts of nature or in works of art, point to him as their culmination and fulfilment. Madhusudana Sarasvati, who, among all Advaita teachers, devotes special attention to the personal form of Brahman, describes Īśvara as 'the sole essence of all that is beautiful' (*ananta-saundarya-sārasarvasva*), <sup>15</sup> 'the seat of the essence of all beauty' (*sakala-saundarya-sāra-nidhāna*), <sup>16</sup> and 'the Beauty of beauties' (*sundara-sundara*). <sup>17</sup>

Concrete forms of the beauty of God are found in connection with particular manifestations of Godhead, such as Śiva and Viṣṇu, the incarnations of Viṣṇu, and again Devī, Gaṇapati, and Subrahmaṇya. We may describe these forms of beauty as concrete for the reason that they represent such excellences of the Divine as are nearer to human comprehension. There is beauty of rhythm in the dance of Śiva, beauty of sport in Kṛṣṇa, of speech and comport in Rāma, of maternal love and care in Devī, of benign assurance in Vighneśvara, and of personal charm and valour in Subrahmaṇya. The variety of these excellences in the different forms of Godhead attract devotees of different tastes to the different forms. And these special attractions of a particular deity to the corresponding taste in a



devotee result in the idea of *iṣṭa-devatā*—the deity nearest to one's heart—which, however, does not prevent one from worshipping other forms of God.

On these special excellences, which constitute the beauty of the Divine at the concrete level, one can speak without end. Their praises have been sung not only by the Itihāsas and Purāṇas but by every saint in the history of Hindu India. What is of special interest from the point of view of philosophy is that, although the concrete manifestations of the divine beauty ostensibly serve the purpose of catering to the devotional needs of the common man, they sometimes do carry a deeper significance. We may mention just two instances.

The many dances of Naṭarāja—Śiva as the Lord of Dance—are said to contain a cosmic and soul-saving significance as celebrated in Śaiva literature. Of these, the dance of bliss (*ānanda-tāṇḍava*) at Cidambaram, which is explained in Tamil works,<sup>18</sup> is said to represent the five missions of Śiva (*pañcakṛtya*). The hand with the sacred drum represents the creation (*śṛṣṭi*) of the world, the facing palm or another represents its preservation (*sthiti*), the hand bearing fire stands for the resolution of the world (*saṁhāra*), the planted foot symbolizes the illusion he casts on the soul by way of rest (*tirobhāva*), and the lifted foot, to which the fourth hand points, assures the soul of the grace (*anugraha*) he bestows on all those who take refuge in him by liberating them. There is an implied reference to this significance in Śrī Śaṅkara's *Sivānandalaharī*.<sup>19</sup>

Another interpretation has it that the *ānanda-tāṇḍava* is the dance of bliss in the heart of the devotee, and 'Cid-ambaram' is the space of one's consciousness. The second interpretation is not opposed to the first, but represents probably the consequence of contemplating with devotion on the cosmic dance of Naṭarāja. It means, then, that when the heart is sufficiently purified by such contemplation, the Lord of Dance floods it with the bliss of his dance within.

The other instance which we may cite is the enchanting form of the Divine Cowherd of Vṛndāvana. The mere fact that the world enchanter has made himself accessible in gross form to the innocent cowherds of Vṛndāvana as their darling has sometimes led to a mundane interpretation of the love which the gopīs bore to Śrī Kṛṣṇa. It



is not merely a modern error. Even Parīkṣit was unconvinced in the beginning. And Śuka had to shake him out of this slumber by telling him that the divine should not be judged by human standards.<sup>20</sup> The love of the gopīs for Kṛṣṇa, according to the best authorities, exemplifies the best of love which the soul could offer towards the Beauty Divine. When Nārada explains the nature of perfect devotion—all-forgetting and one-pointed—the example that he cites is that of the gopīs of Vṛndāvana.<sup>21</sup> Kṛṣṇa himself compliments them by comparing them to sages who, when in meditation, leave behind all thought of the world.<sup>22</sup>

We have so far dealt with the recognition by Vedānta that Brahman is the ultimate in beauty and may be understood at abstract and concrete levels. Among Indian aestheticians, those who have been influenced by Vedānta see in this doctrine the implication that all forms of empirical beauty, whether natural or artistic, are expressions of the beauty of Brahman and as such point to Brahman.

Such an inference is not arbitrary but has support in the general metaphysics of the Vedānta tradition. No matter how the relationship of the physical world (*jagat*) and the individual soul (*jīva*) to God (Brahman) is conceived, during the state of bondage the universe provides to the soul opportunities for insights into the existence and nature of Brahman. Although the whole universe is a manifestation of Brahman, there are certain aspects in it which reveal to us the presence of Brahman more closely than others. The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* passage VI, 14 points out that Brahman is the supreme light by which all the sources of illumination in the world—the sun, the moon, stars, lightning, and fire—show lustre. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (IV, 3, 32), speaking of Brahman in terms of joy, declares that all other joy is but a particle of it. In the Vibhūti-yoga of the *Bhagavad-gītā* the Lord indicates his supremacy by identifying himself with the best of every class of objects and sums up the survey by declaring that whatever being is possessed of greatness, good fortune or energy is a manifestation of a part of his splendour.<sup>23</sup> In the *Śataslokī* Śrī Śaṅkara laments that a man who is able to think only in terms of the body imagines that his own physique, his wife, son, friend, servant, horse, and bull are sources of delight and are sufficient to keep him happy, forgetting all the while the eternal Lord of all their lives seated in their hearts and by whom they are charming.<sup>24</sup>



It is this assurance from the metaphysics of Vedānta that encourages aestheticians to regard beauty in parts of nature and works of art as manifestations of the ultimate in beauty, namely Brahman.

As for beauty in the objects and events in nature, it is part of the real world which rests in Brahman. Hence to a saint they serve as reminders of the presence of God. Śrī Saṅkara felt the divine essence in the spells of nature when he described Devī as the 'creatress of the charms of the lotus' (*sarasīruha saubhāgya-janani*).<sup>25</sup> Of recent times it is said of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa that he often fell into a trance when he came across a lovely scene in nature. Such an intimation may sometimes occur even to the layman on a much fainter scale—and this, according to Vedānta, is the real significance of his being enthralled at the sight of an ice-capped mountain or a trilling water-fall. But natural beauty being connected with actual life, for the ordinary spectator there is always the possibility of his personal interest interfering with his aesthetic attitude towards nature.

As for art, the content of art, so long as its material is gathered from the actual world, is ideal. The imagination of the artist transforms particular facts into general ideas in such a manner that what emerges out of his mind for impression on a medium has no counterpart in the actual world, this process being called idealization (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*). But, although the content of art is unconnected with reality, for the very reason that it is so unconnected, it never runs the risk of personal response from the appreciator whenever he contemplates it. The purity of the delight which art can give through disinterested and impersonal response has been compared to the bliss of realizing Brahman. *Brahmāsvāda-sahodaraḥ*, *brahmāsvādamiva-anubhāvayan*, etc. are expressions used by Indian aestheticians to describe the nature of the highest order of art experience technically called *rasa*. And the point of using such expressions by Vedānta-oriented aestheticians is to show that the delight is not a temporary acquisition by the self from the work of art but a provisional release by the work of the native bliss of the self, which is either identical with or related to the bliss of Brahman. This theory that art is an expression of Brahman is developed in specific forms by specialists in individual arts.

The first of these is the *rasa-brahma-vāda* of the specialists in poetry and drama. The term *rasa* does not stand for aesthetic delight in



general nor even for artistic delight in general. It is a term specifically applied to the most intense type of artistic delight which occurs in the appreciation of those works of art where emotions (*bhāva*) instead of external phenomena form the theme. The study of *rasa* is the special contribution of aestheticians in the fields of drama and poetry. The ultimate in bliss (*ānanda*) is Brahman itself. *Rasa* in art is a manifestation of Brahman bliss in the self of the appreciator. This view has come to be called *rasa-brahma-vāda*.

Following the dramaturgists and poeticians, specialists in two other fine arts, namely music and architecture, evolved their own versions of the connection between art and Brahman. These theories, however, were not in conflict with *rasa-brahma-vāda*, for *rasa* could be experienced in any type of fine art, though it was first identified in poetry and drama. The additional theories therefore represented Brahman-connections involved in aspects of art other than the appreciator's experience. The one propounded in music is based on the concept of medium and that in architecture relates to structure.

The specialists in music, beginning with Śarṅgadeva, propounded the theory known as *nāda-brahma-vāda*. The essence of music is *nāda*, or sound in its inarticulate or pre-vocal state. The specialists in music conceive of Brahman as the ultimate source of *nāda*, such a conception being called Nāda-Brahman. The idea is not arbitrary, for it is found exemplified by great musicians. In songs like *Nādasudhārasaṁbilanu* and *Ni-daya-ce-Rāma* Tyāgarāja-svāmī describes Rāma as an incarnation of Nāda. In *Nādatanumanīṣam* he speaks of Śiva as the embodiment of Nāda. Music, in turn, is considered as the manifestation of Nāda-Brahman. To great saint-composers this is not merely a matter of theory but one of felt experience. In songs such as *Mokṣamugaladā* and *Nāda-loluḍai* Tyāgarāja feels assured that to those who know the true significance of music as emanating from Brahman and sing it with devotion to God music becomes a sure means to salvation; it is itself a *yoga* (*nāda-yoga*).

In the field of architecture King Bhoja put forward the theory named *vāstu-brahma-vāda*. Architecture is the construction of *vāstu*, or dwelling place, such as building or city. It may be the dwelling place of living persons such as a house or a city or the dwelling place of the memory of a departed person such as a memorial or, again, of an



image of God for worship such as a temple. But since Brahman is the ultimate indweller of all persons and objects, these beautiful constructions of man are regarded as the special dwelling places of Brahman. And Brahman conceived of as the indweller of architecture is Vāstu-Brahman.

The view that art is a manifestation of the beauty of Brahman applies to art whether its theme pertains to the world and life or to God. The artist is free to choose his theme. Art may well represent secular themes. It could deal with any aspect of nature, of human activity or of emotion in mundane life. Even in these cases art is an expression of Brahman by virtue of the fact that through its technique of idealization it produces a self-forgetful delight which is akin to Brahman-bliss.

Apart from the above general connection through delight, art may enter into a special relationship with Brahman through a change of theme from the secular to the sacred. This could happen in two ways.

An artist, instead of constructing his theme around any of the ordinary emotions such as human love, mirth, sorrow, anger, courage, fear, disgust or wonder, may choose to work on man's devotion to God (*bhakti*). In a work of this kind the character (*bhūmikā*) who is the subject of the emotion is a great devotee. He may be one chosen by the artist or the artist himself. The basic cause which evokes his devotion (*ālambana-vibhāva*) is God himself in some personal form which is most appealing to the devotee. As the story of his devotion embedded in his praise of God is unfolded before the appreciator, the latter's own latent devotional feeling is roused and transformed into the impersonal state of delightful experience called *bhakti-rasa*. And the experience of *bhakti-rasa* amounts to the practice of disinterested devotion by virtue of the fact that the appreciator's commonplace devotion (*aparā-bhakti*) is temporarily lifted to the higher level of devotion (*parā-bhakti*), the secret of this transformation being the appreciator's provisional identification with the devotee-character. In this manner the work of art becomes a medium of worship (*bhakti-sādhana*). There are many instances of the *bhakti-rasa* type of art in India, especially in drama, poetry, and music. The *Śrīmad-bhāgavata* is cited as the best example of this type.



The other way in which art may enter into special relationship with Brahman is by shifting the focus of the theme from the devotee of God to God himself. In this case, the appreciators themselves are the devotees and the work of art becomes for them an object of worship. Examples of this kind can be found in a wider variety of fine arts including architecture, sculpture, and painting. Hymnic poetry dwells on the various attributes of God. Temples serve as centres of worship. Icons and pictures of Gods and Goddesses inside temples and homes serve as objects of worship to those whose hearts are drawn towards them.

Although the artist is under no obligation to work on a theme dealing with devotion and God, many Hindu artists have felt the urge to do so. To some extent Mahāyāna art may be said to resemble Hindu divine art in so far as the Buddha raised to the level of God becomes an object of worship.

A distinguishing feature of art which has divine themes in either of the two ways described above is that the content is not imaginary as in the case of works dealing with secular themes. When an artist draws material from common life for a conventional theme, he generalizes particular instances, and in doing so, renders them perfect by adding fancy to fact, so that what comes out of his mind for expression in a medium is something extra-ordinarily beautiful for which there is no counterpart in the actual world of men and things. But when the artist chooses to work on a theme connected with God himself, he does not alter the reality of God. His idealization is confined to the *view* of God, where alone by virtue of his own deep devotion he feels himself free to exercise his imagination so as to render the view in accordance with his tastes without impairing the status of God. Such God-centred works have come not only from artists yearning for the vision of God but also from saints expressing their experience of God through the medium of art.

In the course of the foregoing treatment of divine beauty as a theme of art, we have referred to *bhakti-rasa*. The treatment has carefully avoided any reference to *śānta-rasa* in this context, because, although *bhakti* is a means to *śānta*, the necessary reference of *śānta* is not to Brahman, the ultimate reality, but to liberation, the ultimate



value. There are faiths in traditional India which believe in liberation but not in God, namely Jainism and Teravāda Buddhism. Hence though *sānta* may involve *bhakti*, it could also happen without involving *bhakti*.

## NOTES

1. The same idea is represented in the author's book *The Indian Philosophy of Beauty* by the expression 'transcendental aesthetics'. (See Part One, p. 58.)

2. vide M. Hiriyanna, *Essentials of Indian Philosophy*, pp. 12-13 and *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, pp. 33-34.

3. vide *Mundaka*, I, 1, 3; *Chāndogya*, VI, 1, 3; *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, IV, 5, 6.

4. vide *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, II, 2, 8.

5. vide II, 55-57 and VI, 27-32.

6. *Dhvanyāloka*, *udyota* I, *vṛtti* on *kārikā* 2.

7. *pratīyamānaṁ punaranyadeva*  
*vastvasto vāñīṣu mahākavīnām |*  
*yattatprasiddhāvayavātiriktaṁ*  
*ābhāti lāvaṇyamivāṅganāsu ||*

—*Dhvanyāloka*, *udyota* I, *kārikā* 4. See also the *vṛtti* thereon.

8. The reference here is to artists as such as distinguished from artists who are themselves seers. For this distinction see the author's book *The Indian Philosophy of Beauty*, Part One, p. 72.

9. M. Hiriyanna, *Art Experience*, p. 20.

10. For a detailed account see C. Sivaramamurti, *Mahābalīpuram*, pp. 21-22.

11. *Rasagaṅgadhara*, *ānana* I, *kāvya-lakṣaṇa-prakaraṇa*.

12. I, 4, 8.

13. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, II, 4, 5 and IV, 5, 6.

14. *Śrīmad-bhāgavata*, X, 52, 37.

15. *Gūḍhārtha-dīpikā* on *Bhagavad-gītā*, VII, 14.

16. *ibid.*, XII, 6 and 7.

17. *ibid*

18. e.g. *Unmai-viḷakkam*, *Cidambarammaṇi-kovai*, and *Tirumantram*. For details see A. K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Siva*, pp. 66-78 and C. Sivaramamurti *Naṭarāja in Art, Thought and Literature*, pp. 23-41.

19. v. 55.

20. vide *Śrīmad-bhāgavata*, X, 33, 30 ff.



21. *yathā vṛjagopikānām : Nāradaḥbhakti-sūtra*, 21.
22. *vide Śrīmad-bhāgavata*, XI, 12, 12-13.
23. X, 41.
24. v. 5.
25. *Saundaryalaharī*, v. 51. The translation of this phrase is from M. Hiriyanna *Indian Conception of Values*, p. 317.

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