

ART IN ANCIENT INDIA: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

We say that art carries with it an element of surprise both for the creator as well as the beholder, while craft is premeditated and contrived. The important thing is that an art tradition should be evaluated in terms of criteria of excellence it lays down for itself and not from the vantage point of an outsider. So it is a proper approach to see traditional Indian art (of ancient India) from an insider's vantage point. A traditional Indian artist is traditional Indian first and artist later; he is an artist not because he has chosen his profession out of all others that were accessible to him but because he was born into it. Indeed there has been so close a connection between traditional Indian arts and religious practices that many art critics and historians of Indian art have equated traditional art with sacred art. If art is considered sacred, then every act of performing it starts with a purification of the environment. This purification is achieved in ancient India by rituals performed before setting out to create a work of art. Are we justified in calling Indian art sacred and spiritual because of these ritualistic practices? This question can be answered by carefully analyzing how a traditional artist looks upon his whole enterprise. If he sees his art activity as a religious activity, then many of the problems that confront an ordinary artist would have no significance for him; but if we follow the pursuits of traditional Indian artists, we realize that, like any other artist in the world, they are preoccupied with the same kind of problems. It does not appear that the problems that engage them were any different from those which occupied the aesthetic thinkers of the West. It is in this sense that these ritualistic acts are to be described as acts of deprofanization; for these acts delineate clearly a break with the mundane space and time, and show the unfolding of an autonomous spatio-temporal situation of the aesthetic object. It is the autonomy of art which matters most for ancient Indian artist. Therefore, the characterization of ancient Indian art as sacred or spiritual is inadequate for its proper understanding and appreciation.

Key Words: *Art, Craft, Sacred, Traditional, Modern, Deprofanization, Space, Time, Aesthetics*

In recent times, the term 'art' has been used to stand for such configuration of symbols which have a certain unforeseeable quality in their structural and semantic dimensions. We contrast it with craft, which follows a given recipe and the end result of which can be clearly anticipated. We say that art carries with it an element of surprise both for the creator as well as the beholder, while craft is premeditated and contrived. What distinguishes a work of art from that of craft is the uniqueness, expressiveness and originality of the former as against the functionality and repetitiveness of the latter. This way of looking upon art presupposes a belief in art for art's sake, a theory which is recent in origin and leaves no scope for the correct understanding of ancient

art. It relies heavily on novelty as a criterion for something to qualify as a work of art. Contrary to making any claims to novelty the traditional artists make the opposite claim that nothing novel is rendered by them; rather they are merely vehicles of rendering the primordial art forms. Unlike his modern counterpart, the traditional artist is essentially working out through his art creation a primeval form, laying out in advance the various stages for its creation. Should one relegate traditional art to the level of craft, because the traditional artist sees his enterprise as a re-enactment of an already existing paradigm? This problem confronts anyone who undertakes a serious study of traditional arts.¹

The important thing is that an art tradition should be evaluated in terms of criteria of excellence it lays down for itself and not from the vantage point of an outsider. So it is a proper approach to see traditional Indian art from an insider's vantage point. In order to probe deeper, it will be useful first to reconstruct the world of traditional person. Being traditional, like being modern, is a way of life which manifests itself in the different dimensions of existence. The pursuit of art is only one of the dimensions of this multifaceted existence. Mircea Eliade has tried to reconstruct the life style of the traditional people in detail. He has shown that –

“..... for the traditional societies all the important act of life were revealed *ab origine* by gods or heroes. Men only repeat this exemplary and paradigmatic gestures *ad infinitum*..... an object or an act becomes real only insofar as it imitates or repeats an archetype. Thus reality is acquired through repetition or participation, everything which lacks an exemplary model is ‘meaningless’, i.e. it lacks reality. Men would have then a tendency to become archetypal or paradigmatic. This tendency may well appear paradoxical, in the sense that the man of a traditional culture see himself as a real, i.e. as truly himself, only and precisely in so far as he ceases to be himself (for a modern observer) and is satisfied with imitating and repeating the gestures of another.”²

The traditional man is born in a nexus of already existing relationships. The key to unlock this complex of relationships is already given to him by his community. If he is born a Hindu, his caste, age and family situation already lay down the parameters of his existence. It is only by working out these norms in his individual existence that he achieves the purpose of his life. While confronted with any traditional form of art, it is essential to bear these facts in mind, because this forms the backdrop of a traditional artist's psyche.

A traditional Indian artist is traditional Indian first and artist later; he is an artist not because he has chosen his profession out of all others that were accessible to him but because he was born into it. Just as being born of a particular sex entails certain responsibilities, similarly for a traditional man being born in a certain community and caste implies a certain set of obligations and responsibilities. Even though these obligations and responsibilities are given to him by his tradition, translating them into his historical existence is not a mechanical process. To the extent he is a self-conscious being, he is no less faced with the dilemma as of choice than the modern

man. The only difference being in the boundaries, the modern man, contrasted to the traditional person, has more open ended boundaries. One's profession forms a part of one's social obligations. Since in ancient India there is no distinction between art and craft, there was nothing special in being an artist. There were artists just as there were carpenters, weavers and soldiers. This is quite clear from the way Indian theorists have classified the different crafts. The *Kamsutra* of Vatsyayana mentioned sixty four skills including singing, dancing, painting as well as flower decoration, making garlands, maquillage, weaving, recitation and carpentry. It is interesting to note that the generic term to describe all these activities is *vidya* (knowledge) and not *kala* (art). In fact the distinction between art and skill is conspicuously absent in the traditional Indian texts. This is essentially a reason why there is no treatise on aesthetics as an abstract theoretical study involving a conceptual analysis of art in general. In fact it would not be inappropriate to say that aesthetics in India is more of a study of criticism in different art genres than a philosophical study of art. Even in western tradition, such treatises were not written before the eighteenth century, although there are instances of general discussion on beauty, the creative process and the relationship of art to reality right from the time of Plato. In the Indian texts, there are references to poets, sculptors, painters, but not to artists in general.

Of late there has been a tendency to highlight the non-utilitarian and gratuitous character of art works. Since, in the traditional scheme, crafts and arts form a continuum, even the objects that may appear purely as aesthetic creations, were not intended to be seen as such. They were often objects of worship but sometimes article utilized only for decorative purposes. Indeed there has been so close a connection between traditional Indian arts and religious practices that many art critics and historians of Indian art have equated traditional art with sacred art. The term 'sacred' has generally contrasted with 'commonplace' and 'profane' by emphasizing its divine origin. If pursued in its purity it is said to be conducive to well-being and health, while deviations from established conventions lead to misfortune, death and illness. The myths and legends woven around the origin of traditional Indian arts are cited to emphasize their sacred character.

There are numerous examples in different Indian texts to substantiate this point. The *Natyashastra* contains the sacred allusions of drama.³ Drama, being a composite art, involves in its production of all other arts – architecture, sculpture, painting, dance, music and poetry. Drama owes its origin to Brahma, who created it by a yogic act of recollecting and synthesizing the four Vedas. He took recitation (*pathya*) from *Rigveda*, singing (*gita*) from *Samveda*, dramatization (*abhinaya*) from *Yajurveda* and aesthetic emotion (*rasa*) from *Atharvaveda*. *Natyashastra* contains another reference which highlights the sacred origin of dramatic performance. This relates to the various gifts endowed by the different gods to the dramatic performance. Indra gave his auspicious banner (*dhvaja*), Brahma gave a curved staff (*kutilaka*), Varuna gave a golden pitcher (*bhringara*), Surya gave an umbrella (*chhatra*), Shiva gave the boon of successful performance (*siddhi*), Vayu gave a fan (*vyajanam*), Vishnu gave a throne (*singhasana*), Kubera gave a crown (*mukutam*) and

Sarasvati granted audibility (*shravyatam*) to the visual spectacle. The other Devas (gods), Gandharvas (celestial musicians), Yakshas (a class of demi-gods who are described as attendants of Kubera), Rakshasas (demons), Pannagas (serpents) bestowed on the actors actions, rendering different *rasas*, *roopas* (forms), *bala* (vigour) and *kriya* (movement) along with their various *alamkaras* (embellishments).⁴

There are many more myths and legends that stress the sacred origin of different arts. For example, architecture is said to have originated through a revelation to mankind by Vishvakarma, the builder of the universe. Similarly, there is a myth associated with the creation of painting. It relates to a king whose son died, and when Yama refused to restore his life Brahma instructed the king to paint a portrait of the dead prince and thus bring him back to life. The earliest treatise on music, *Gandharvaveda* is supposed to have been composed by Gandharvas. Similarly, the first poem was composed by Valmiki through the inspiration of Brahma as it was conveyed to him by Narada.

Since art is considered sacred, every act of performing it starts with a 'deprofanization' of the environment. Deprofanization is achieved by rituals performed before setting out to create a work of art. A large number of Indian treatises on art regard these rituals obligatory. In the *Natyashastra*, Bharata categorically states the necessity of performing *pooja* on the stage –

“He, who will hold the dramatic spectacle without offering the *pooja*, will find his knowledge of the art useless, and he will be reborn as an animal of the lower order (*tiryag-yoni*). Hence producers of the play should first of all offer by all means, *pooja* to the presiding deity of the stage, which is similar to the Vedic sacrifice.”⁵

Similarly, Bharata gives the following instructions to builders to perform rituals before laying the foundation stone of the theatre –

“At the time of laying the foundation, ghee and Payasa should be offered to Brahmans, Madhuparaka to the king and rice with molasses (*gura*) to masses of dramatic art.”⁶

At every stage of construction there are different types of rituals to be performed: when the sides and plinth of stage are built; or the doors, walls and green room (*nepathya*) are constructed. Some of these rituals are performed even these days when one sets out to build a temple or a house to live in.

One finds similar examples in *Vishnudharmottara* and *Agni Puranas*. For example, the *Agnipurana* contains instructions to perform rituals before the construction of temples –

“After having purified the earth, the consecrator of the temple shall take possession of the ground.....And shall cause the offering known as *Bhootabali* to be made all along the area up to the surrounding wall, the component parts of the offering being curd, powder barley, fried paddy.”⁷

Furthermore, there are instructions to dancers to dance on auspicious occasions and not in a state of anxiety,⁸ because *nritya* brings about joy and thus should be avoided during illness, anxiety and strain. Dancing is treated like an offering to gods. It is mentioned in *Vishnudharmottara Purana* that gods are more pleased at dancing than at any other offering, for example, flowers of oblations.⁹

All these examples have one feature in common: they attempt to sanctify the environment through rituals. Rituals help to mark out the *sui generis* character of aesthetic situation. As soon as the Bharatnatyam dancer begins the *pooja* of Shiva or Ganesha, both the spectator and the dancer are transported into an imaginary realm with its own autonomous space and time. Are we justified in calling Indian art sacred and spiritual because of these ritualistic practices?

This question can be answered by carefully analyzing how a traditional artist looks upon his whole enterprise. If he sees his art activity as a religious activity, then many of the problems that confront an ordinary artist would have no significance for him; for his major concern would be to experience and communicate through symbols a supersensible reality. The mode of communicating this experience could be accidental and contingent. But if we follow the pursuits of traditional Indian Artists, we realize that, like any other artist in the world, they are preoccupied with the same kind of problems. For instance, a traditional Indian actor is as preoccupied with the problem of conveying emotions through various gestures, intonation of voices, dresses and stage sets as any other actor in the world. Similarly, an ancient Indian painter is as concerned about capturing the likeness of objects through lines and colors. If this is so, then the problem arises regarding the significance and importance we give to these myths of origin of art forms as well as the ritualistic practices undertaken before the commencement of any art. And does the existence of these rituals change the nature of the aesthetic experience? Reading about the discussions of Indian aesthetic thinkers like Bhatta Nayaka, Abhinavagupta, Jagannatha and others, it does not appear that the problems that engage them were any different from those which occupied the aesthetic thinkers of the West. This fact makes one think that this was to highlight the autonomy of art works that architect thought of deprofanizing space before building an edifice, actors and the directors attempted to cordon off both space and time before performing the dramatic work. And it is in this sense that these ritualistic acts are to be described as acts of deprofanization; for these acts delineate clearly a break with the mundane space and time, and show the unfolding of an autonomous spatio-temporal situation of the aesthetic object. An aesthetic situation is marked by an autonomy of space and time. A musical work unfolds its own time-sequence, a painting its

autonomous space relation. Like a dream they are parasitical on mundane space and time, but they are insulated from this mundane spatio-temporal matrix inasmuch they are impermeable by it.

The moment a dramatic work begins, it unfolds a time-sequence autonomous to it; mundane time has no relation to the internal temporality of the play. While this spatio-temporal autonomy is common to all works of art, in traditional Indian arts it is achieved with the help of ritualistic practices which generate and concretize an imaginary realm. This concretization of the imaginary is common to all art; but in traditional Indian arts the imagination of the artist is directed by eternal paradigms, or what Mircea Eliade has called the 'archetypes'¹⁰.

So just as for the traditional man the culmination of his existence is achieved by interweaving into his ephemeral existence the eternal values of the heroes of myths and legends, in the same way for a traditional artist the highest point of creative expression is reached in concretizing an eternal myth. For him creativity does not lie in the crystallization of an unprecedented unique image in a historical moment, but it lies in uniquely re-enacting a timeless paradigm.

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