

## **The Indian Concept of Beauty: Dimensions and Contexts**

'Beauty is skin deep' was the first page leading story in this morning's re-mix supplement of an English daily seeking to compound with filmy broth spices of different hues and tastes – arts, cultures, sciences, global trends in fashions, researches in various domains, and even trade and industry and sometimes religion and philosophy. Its mystique caught the eye. It seemed to explore beauty in layers deeper than the skin, somewhere beyond its phenomenalism – beyond its color, fluidity, transparency, tenderness, smoothness, wrinkles or roughness, all that belonged to surface, perhaps the same as in early days the Buddhist canonical literature ordained when artists assembled to represent the Buddha's likeness were commanded to paint the Buddha beyond colors.

However, the text that followed was a bit disappointing. It talked of beauty, the most mysterious thing in the entire creation, without talking of its mystique. Except the heading the entire text was formal and informative – how a new research has revealed that a woman with an even and radiant skin finds more admirers than one with the symmetry of face, that is, a face, however symmetrically cast, does not have same charm as has one mounted with lustrous and even skin. Incidentally, the write-up discovers that it is because of their good skin in their close-up shots that the older actresses – the text mentions a few by names, continue to retain their charm despite their age. In the next paragraph it abruptly shifts to the relative behaviour of men and women in matters of love acclaiming that men are quicker in making proposals of love than women and that men over fifty-five years of age are most active and experimental in seeking dates.

In paragraphs that followed it talked of yoga, tips as to how to remain youthful and attractive, love-jealousies, and some other aspects of human behaviour, besides interviews of some young college girls and professionals on results of these researches. A truly re-mix, if anything was completely missing it was the term 'deep', crux of the phrase, if it was read over and under the lines. The entire text fluttered around the surface betraying no eagerness to peep inside.

### **Beauty As Art Perceives It**

This essay seeks to simply explore how art perceives beauty. Beauty has been the most common theme of rhetoric and intellectual discourse world over for about two and a half millenniums, some scholars/philosophers dragging it into this domain, and others, into that; hence, such simplification of the subject as this might hardly be conceded. At least this much would be argued that representation, not perception, is more appropriate a term for defining art's relation with beauty. This position is not, however, fully correct. No doubt, art represents a form but mere representation of a form is not its objective.

Every form, at least such as art seeks to represent, has inherently a beyond-form essence – its beauty, at least as this ‘beyond-form essence’ is visually defined. In art, form, and even its actual dimensions as a camera reproduces, becomes a mere vehicle of this ‘beyond-form essence’. Thus, art represents a form ordinarily for representing the beauty that such form manifests; and unless the art perceives, or rather discovers, that beauty manifesting in the form, it might reproduce a material model of the represented object, not its essential spirit, and thus not a work of art.

A work of art, a painting, sculpture, metal-cast or whatever, discovers its distinction in its power to reveal this essence – the beauty, and the relative levels of its excellence. It is this power of art that discovers in the portrait of Mona Lisa, a woman believed to be having an odd-looking inflated neck, the highest level of sublimity of beauty that a feminine form enshrines, and thus one of a few great masterpieces of world art. It is in manifestations of the Great Goddess as ferocious Kali, Bhairavi, Chamunda, Chhinamasta and several other forms including those of Buddhist deities, Shiva as Bhairava or Vishnu as Narsimha among others that the Indian art has created many of its most beautiful divine forms and many of its great masterpieces. Art attributes to these and similar other ferocious looking forms such divine dimensions that in them manifests a strange benignity and their awfulness is dispelled.

Hence, beauty in context to art is more or less the vision of the mind that the artist translates into a form, or rather into a transform beyond such form’s actual dimensions. Formal accuracy, measured point to point – a kind of instrumentality, belongs to the domain of technology; the art does not dwell on surface or confine to measurements; it rather delves deeper into it where dimensions diffuse, immeasurable ‘inner’ – its spiritual quiescence or material conflicts surface, and what appears seems to be foreign to the represented form. Even in realistic art the ‘real’ is the mere semblance – impression of the real, not real; in terminology of art ‘real’ is not the same as ‘actual’. Though often striving to incorporate into its body some features from domains beyond it, ‘actual’ relates to utility or serves some practical purpose; art transcends utility and is not meant to serve a practical purpose. A painting might be a ladder for someone’s ascendance into the realms of delight but not for reaching the first floor of a building. A wooden table, however artistically made, is a carpenter’s thing manufactured for a purpose; it passes into a painter’s domain the moment it emerges on canvas which gathers along its image also various effects – light, shade, angles, perspectives and total ambience along its enshrining spirit, independent or as part of the portrayal of the sitter. Now it is an image for pleasing the eye and thereby the mind, not an object to serve a utility. Sometimes a canvas fixed on a wall takes you to lands where none of your modes of transport – an aircraft, bullet-train or whatever, can ever carry.

## Beauty Is Skin Deep

If the phrase 'beauty is skin deep' is taken as suggesting that beauty is not merely what appears to eye or which gratifies the senses but something deeper than the 'sensory' or 'sensual', it is closer to the art's vision of beauty. From the East to the West, ancient days to modern times, and religious scriptures to a roadside hawker's 'masala' – spicy, magazine beauty is celebrated as bliss beyond par. The Indian maxim 'Satyam Shivam Sundaram' dually applies.

It perceives beauty as the manifestation of the ultimate truth and the highest good, and at the same time conjointly all three are the attributes of the Supreme. However, even as attributes of the Supreme they have different levels significance. Of the three beauty alone manifests into a form while truth and good do not.

Truth and good reveal in act, and the act itself is the attribute of the form. Thus, truth and good themselves seek formal expression in beauty. Adi Shankaracharya propounded : 'Brahma satyam, jagat mithya' which equates 'satya' with Brahma, the Ultimate, and 'jagat' – all created things, with false. Thus, beauty, the manifestation of satya, is also the manifestation of Brahma. Irrespective of how the western metaphysicians/philosophers/scholars view or viewed it, the common man's perception of beauty in the West, which aptly reflects in the words of English Romantic poet Keats : 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that's all ye know and all ye need to know', only reverberates this Indian vision of beauty.

Not truthful or blissful, beauty is the ultimate truth, supreme bliss and the timeless source of creativity. This ages' long Indian vision of beauty combining aestheticism with theology deifies beauty and perceives it enshrining all forms, divine or ephemeral, live or dead, or even those that common mind considers awful or ugly. No system of faith in India, not even such ones as Jainism that favoured complete renunciation, has ever denounced beauty. The Jains conceptualized over figures of their Tirthankaras, emaciated by long rigorous penance, glowing faces with divine aura beautifying them.

As in Buddhist religion, the Buddha of art has always been one whose face enshrined the light of the Enlightened, his intrinsic beauty, the Buddha beyond colors, as the Buddhist canonical literature standardized his vision. Thus, art, especially the Indian, has always spiritualized its aestheticism when beauty was its theme.

## Beauty And Art's Universal Appeal

Unlike other possessions beauty has strange universality. While food, however rich, or money, however voluminous, gives satisfaction and pleasure only to him who eats or holds it, beauty delights universally, beyond barriers, without

question or calculation, and unconditionally. This universality is the essence of beauty and it is what gives to art its universal appeal and timeless quality. Beauty's significance in an individual's life is hardly any less. Man's desire to live is subordinate to his sense of beauty. Even a leper, a disabled, or a beggar is found engaged in beautifying his person. The day one begins believing that he is ugly he loses that desire to live.

Beauty is oceanic but without oceans tides and tempests. Grace, tenderness, placidity, sublimity and power to inspire are beauty's essential organs, and it is in them that beauty seeks its form and expression in Indian art. In the contemporary world it is in this universalizing quality of beauty that market has discovered immense potentials and now beauty is perhaps a more potent bread-earner than any other market-commodity.

### Man's Sensitivity In Regard To Beauty

Beauty is strangely phenomenal but it as strongly inspires subjectivity, so much so that one discovers beauty's first manifestation in oneself. This sensitivity is so strong that he can not even think that anyone, even an animal, might be indifferent to one's appearance. As reflects in a number of folklore and legends, man has attributed even to nature his own mind contemplating how an animal, bird or plant would react to its look, both agreeable and disagreeable. The peacock's legend is one of its best examples. The magnificence and beauty of peacock, a charming dancing bird, is superb when in monsoon months it dances under a sky covered with clouds. Its fully blown brilliant multi-hued feathers are its most beautiful body-part, while its crude bony legs, the ugliest. As the nature has it, when on peak of excitement during its dance, there roll from its eyes a couple of tears. This human mind perceives that the peacock sheds these tears when during its dance it looks joyously at the beauty of its feathers, and painfully, at its ugly feet, one inspiring joy, while other, generating pain and tears.

The Champa flower, known for its exceptional sweet fragrance, comprising irregularly shaped petals much like a bunch of sick pale leaves, has quite an ordinary, if not ugly, look. Unlike other flowering plants the flowers of Champa grow inside covered under its thick leaves. This human mind feels that abashed of unattractive ordinary look of its flowers Champa does not like displaying them. A crow, jealous of the beauty of cuckoo's melodious voice, kills its offspring, and a monkey, alike jealous of the great beauty of a weaver-bird's nest, destroys it. In the Pancha-tantra, Kalila-ba-Dimana and dozens of other texts man has woven around animals hundreds of similar tales which reveal his mind rather than theirs.

### Adornment Of Beauty : Evolution Of The Cult

Obviously, whatever the form it manifested in, the beauty has been exclusively the man's vision – his passion, and sometimes his obsession. Myths and fictions

apart, man alone has the ability to apprehend and appreciate beauty. He has instinctively in him since times immemorial a desire to possess 'beauty' – anything beautiful, nature's creation or his own, a person or an object, and an eagerness to adorn it. Creation of beauty into a form always required a talent or at least some level of skill; however, the adornment of oneself has always been common to all men and women, and not merely that there reflected in the level or kind of such adornment a person's individual or social status and aesthetic taste, but also the same level of commitment as he or she has for a ritual. It is now long when the cult of adorning beauty – shringara or roop-sajja as it was called, seems to have attained such level of sublimation as attributed to it the sanctity or divinity of a rite.

This magnification of the cult of adornment is obviously metaphoric. It seems that the tradition, which perceived beauty as the manifestation of the Supreme, saw beauty's adornment as service rendered to Him for the beauty was seen as His manifestation. Roop-sajja, inherently linked with auspices, festivities and piety, is not thus an act of mere aesthetic domain but has rather ritual connotations. A bath, foremost of adornment, is also the foremost of all rituals and preceded every auspice, a significant occasion, or even a routine, from taking a meal or opening a business establishment to coronation or worship of deity. A 'bindi' on the forehead, 'mangala-sutra' – auspicious thread, on the neck, bangles on the wrist, ear-rings, nose and feet ornaments, or vermilion applied to hair-parting, red dye on feet etc. are essence of an Indian woman's marital status as well as her rites by performing which she is believed to attain the highest good and salvation.

More closely than the beauty and rites are linked beauty and culture. Appreciation of beauty and its adornment was man's ever first step towards his transformation into a cultured being. As suggests some of the rock-shelter drawings, even the nomad, at least after he settled in his rock-shelter, aspired to have a different look and sought to enhance it by adorning it. Terracotta figurines and seals cast with human figures, excavated from various Indus and Harappan sites, especially the different forms of the Indus mother goddess, reveal exceptional taste for fashion-costumes and jewellery of which the excavated material reveals quite a wide range. The Vedic asceticism had its own contexts of beauty. The Rig-Veda perceives Ushas, the goddess of dawn, emerging from behind the eastern sky like a bride in radiant costume and glittering jewels.

The Vedas and the later Vedic literature have scattered over their leaves in abundance such sets of imagery which present glaring examples of how they visualized beauty and its adornment. By the time of Puranas not merely the iconography of each god and goddess but also the types of their specific costumes and ornaments were specified.

## Adornment Set To Standards

Some kind of class-wise allocation of ensembles and jewellery was ordained by Manu in his Smriti; however, as reflects in a number of episodes in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, it was perhaps around the period of the great Epics that some kind of ritual sanctity was attributed to personal adornment. Sita gives up all her ornaments and replaces with bark-cloth her silk costume before she leaves Ayodhya with Rama for exile. Sage Vashishtha, the family teacher, rules that king Dasharatha has exiled Rama, not Sita; hence, it is against the Law that she wears bark – the attire of ascetics.

Though not expressly, this mandate of Law reflects later also in the act of Anasuya, the wife of sage Atri, herself well-versed in scriptures, tradition, and Law. In her silent disapproval of Sita's unadorned person she gives her ever-lustrous divine costumes and jewels when the latter comes to the hermitage of her husband, and restores Sita's essential identity. In the Mahabharata, there are many similar episodes. After Pandavas lost Draupadi, their wife, in the game of dice, Dushasana, the younger brother of Duryodhana, brought her dragging by hair in the open court. What tormented Draupadi most, and haunted her memory ever after, was that she was brought before the elders when she had not even dressed her hair. She vowed to dress it only after she had Dushasana's blood to anoint. Obviously, an unadorned body was not presentable and nothing could disgrace a woman more than depriving her of the adornment prescribed to her class.

Around the beginning of the Common Era there emerged several schools of thought that not only innovated numerous forms of the art of love making but also discovered hundreds of herbs, waxes, essential oils, perfumes, minerals, essences, pastes, ointments, powders, ashes, excrements, and even bones among others which on one hand added elegance, glow and grace to a person's appearance enhancing feminineness of a woman and masculinity of a man, and on the other, re-vitalized their energies and redeemed them of age-effects and related ailments. As suggest a number of treatises on the subject including sage Vatsyayana's Kamasutra, the art of adornment and love making were essential parts of curriculums taught at Gurukulas – seats of teachers. In the introductory part of his Kamasutra sage Vatsyayana makes a mention of many earlier treatises on the subject some of them claimed to have been composed by the descendant of Brahma himself and to have extended into one lac verses. Sage Vatsyayana has devoted one of the seven chapters of his treatise, the last one, to adornment of beauty and how it could become more bewitching.

Inspired largely by Vatsyayana's Kamasutra there emerged a wide tradition of the art of love of which adornment of beauty was the most significant aspect. Vatsyayana's Kamasutra gave to the Indian art, especially temple-sculptures, across the land for many centuries its timeless imagery thriving with the vigour of life. The sculptural panels in the temples, like those at Khajuraho, Konark,

Bhuvaneshvara, Bhoramdeva in Chhattisgarh, and at hundreds of other places, not only portrayed 'mithunas' – couples engaged in amorous acts, but also numerous 'nayikas' – heroines, engaged in 'shringara', bathing, looking into mirror, applying vermillion into hair-parting, putting on ensembles and ornaments or removing them. As a matter of fact, 'shringara' is the crux of conventions like 'Nayika-bheda' – classification of maidens in love, or Barahmasa – emotional reactions of those in love to month-wise changes of nature around, and of Rati-shashtra –love-classics. It is in the form of maidens engaged in 'shringara' that the Indian art has got many of its timeless classics.

### 'Shringara': Adornment Of Deity

Later, with the spread of Vaishnava devotional cult, the term 'shringara', especially when used in isolation, denoted adornment of deity, more often Krishna, Vishnu's incarnation. In all forms of Krishna's worship, either as 'sewa' – service rendered to him, the mode of worship that Vallabhacharya propounded under his cult of Pushti-marg, or otherwise, adornment of the deity-image was the first step towards it. Not only that 'shringara' during winter was not the same as in summer or monsoons but it followed a day-long periodical schedule, the morning 'shringara' being different from that of the noon, afternoon, evening and for the night. The Vaishnava tradition, a blend of aestheticism with spiritualism and of love with service and devotion, saw Krishna manifesting in his divine form the totality of the masculine beauty, the same as the Gopis – cowherd maidens of Brij who collectively represented the Bhagavata Purana's heroine, aggregated the feminine. Later, Radha epitomized in her being this totality of Gopis and the model of absolute feminine beauty.

Thus, in Vaishnava tradition Krishna and Radha represented conjointly the total good and absolute truth, which as absolute model of beauty manifested in their beings.

Incidentally, none of the four major deity-forms of Krishna, Banke Bihari at Vrindavana, Shri Natha Ji at Nathdwara, Dwarikadish at Dwarika, and Jagannatha at Puri, has an image of Radha enshrining along Krishna any of these seats. Obviously, most of the Krishna-related worship traditions perceived him as the Absolute One, and thus, also as the absolute model of beauty – masculine or feminine. Such traditions perceive Radha only as a subordinate entity, or as one who stood to him in the same relation as the 'soul' to the 'supreme soul', or as one who is his mere part – an aspect of his being. Philosophical literature has hardly a rationale to interpret this merger of totality into Krishna, though the thesis, which the legend of Swami Haridasa – saint, poet and singer, reveals, gives some idea of it. As has his legend, every day, with the fall of the evening Swami Haridasa entered into the forest near Vrindavana and wandered into it the whole night searching Krishna said to visit the place every night and meeting Gopis there. Days, months and years passed but Swami Haridasa could not find him. One night when the moon was in full glory and the whole forest, trees, meadows, ponds, glowed in its luster, there appeared before

Swami Haridasa two divine forms, one representing Krishna, and the other, Radha. Suddenly he saw Radha's figure merging into Krishna's, and what Swami Haridasa had now before him was Krishna alone, his form aggregating total feminineness and total masculinity.

### Forms Exploited In Art For Revealing Beauty

As discussed before, despite that beauty is not merely for eye but something beyond it and it is in this 'something' from the domains beyond the eye that the essence of beauty – 'lavanya' as it is sometimes called, lies, it is in form that beauty, or rather all abstractions, seek to manifest. The form, a human figure or a thing's dimensions, has its own beauty; however, instead of a static form beauty manifests more effectively in a form revealing an act. Besides that an act imparts to form curves, angles, postures, perspectives and rhythmic vibrancy with which the façade of a temple or a painting's canvas moves, it is in an act that the form discovers its dramatic dimensions. While modern painters like Picasso and F. M. Hussain discover such dramatic dimensions and rhythm in sharply conceived geometric curves of their figures, the Khajuraho sculptor discovered it in softer aspects – facial demeanor and gentle acts of body :

writing a letter, looking back at a cat, tying a foot ornament or a costume, or looking into mirror among others. Figures engaged in applying lacquer on feet or vermilion into hair-parting, awaiting one's spouse from behind a door, bathing, adorning, swinging, celebrating festivals, Holi with colors and Diwali with crackers and sparklers, looking at a crow believed to be delivering the loved one's message and hundreds other comprise the diction with which the form has its discourse with beauty.

Besides, some forms – a bride, a coy maid, blossoming creeper, a shrub laden with flowers, a demeanor of innocence, a baby bird, animal or child and thousands more, are perpetual source of beauty in art. While attire and ornaments attribute greater beauty to a woman's figure, the surroundings, to an individual object, for the wholeness is always more beautiful than a fragment.

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