

Art, Environment, and the Aesthetics of Art and Environment : A Chapter from Indian Philosophy

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Claude Levi-Strauss' naturalist syndrome of values indicates a relation of humanity and nature which can properly be interpreted as an ecological materialism rather than a reductionism; because when he says that myths reveal mind, mind reveals nature and nature is an autonomous being moving towards its own mysterious *telos*, it does not imply the hypothesis of the 'unity of science' i.e., the assumption that psychology can be explained in terms of biology, biology in terms of chemistry and chemistry in terms of physics, an assumption which has been cogently challenged by Hilary Putnam. Levi-Strauss' intention, however, is to focus on the living system of ecology and the interdependence of these systems with in animate nature. He writes :

Structuralism teaches us to love and respect the ecology, because it is made up of living things, of plants and animals from which since it began mankind did not only derive its sustenance but also, for such a long time, its deepest aesthetic feelings as well as its highest moral and intellectual speculations.¹

Levi-Strauss' ecological materialism explains a dialectrical relation between matter and life : "When we finally succeed in understanding life as a fascination of inert matter, it will be to discover that the latter has properties very different from those previously attributed to it". In an ecological system, such as this, where soul and body, mind and ecology, thought and the world are reconciled, human freedom should be conceived as the *participation* of a living being in the rights of the other species of the same ecological system.

We start with Levi-Strauss because his ideas come very close to what the ancient Indians anticipated several centuries ago, i.e., the dialectics of ecological structure and the origin of aesthetics as a human value in man's participation in the rights and states of affairs of his fellow ecological species. A leading aesthetician of environment, Arnold Berleant agrees with Levi-Strauss substantially when he states that environmental aesthetics "deals with the conditions under which people join as participants in an integrated situation"². Calling this participation as an engagement, Berleant further states that environmental aesthetics is an aesthetics of engagement which "leads to a restructuring of aesthetic theory, a revision especially congenial to environmental aesthetics, in which the continuity of engagement in the natural world replaces the contemplative appreciation of a beautiful object or scene."³ Almost along a Kantian line Berleant ignores the difference between Nature and art. "Nature is beautiful" writes Kant, "because it looks like art, and art can only be called

beautiful if we are conscious of it as art while yet it looks like nature".⁴ But Berleant differs from Kant on one major point, to put in the words of Levi-Strauss : man does not exist independently of nature. Man and nature are both parts of an ecological system tied with an eternal and essential relation of reciprocity. This relation is named by Levi-Strauss "ecological materialism". But man's inherent love for natural beauty, ("aesthetic feelings" in general, originating in the ecological materialism) needs an ontological structure (which Levi-Strauss has failed to establish), and requires a metaphysical infrastructure for supporting man's aesthetic function, which might be called an immersion into natural beauties. We claim that these laconae have been fulfilled by some of the schools and thinkers of ancient Indian philosophy.

For explaining an ecological symbiosis philosophically, what is primarily needed is a theory that living beings and inanimate phenomena of nature must have a common ontological status, so that any attempt at ignoring this symbiosis will destroy this ontological equilibrium causing serious disaster to the ecological structure itself. The oldest school of Indian philosophy, named Sankhya, provides us with a theory which fulfils this primary need.

II

Sankhya system teaches a metaphysics of dualism⁵ -pure consciousness and matter or *Purusa* and *Prakrti* implying metaphors of a male and a female principle respectively that cause procreation. *Prakrti* is the Sanskrit word for the English 'Nature' and it means literally the primal cause of creation or the archetypal/ideal/best creation. This creation may be in two modes--manifest and unmanifest. As independent of each other, when *Purusa* and *Prakrti* remain away from each other, the creation of the latter is in its unmanifest form; and when these two are in proximity, *Prakrti* manifests itself. The material or substantive element of *Prakrti* is 'matter' the constituents of which are three 'qualities'-intelligence (*sattva*), energy (*raja*) and mass (*tamas*)- or principles which are like three constituent strands of a rope. The Sanskrit word *guna* designates three phenomena--quality, strand and contingency. Along with its first two meanings the word *guna* indicates in its third meaning that the material stuff of *Prakrti*'s creation in both of its modes, is secondary in the sense that while comparing the status of both the Realities- *Purusa* and *Prakrti*- *Purusa* is the primary one and *Prakrti* the secondary. In such a consideration, one might note a male-dominated socio-cultural tradition. But such a reading would be confusing since *Purusa* is devoid of any gender division. As a stuff of pure consciousness it is absolutely unqualified and is therefore free from all kinds of relativism and transformation. *Purusa* is not the Platonic idea, nor the Aristotelian unmoved-mover. *Prakrti*'s manifestation starts when it is charged with the pure consciousness of *Purusa*. The latent *gunas* are stirred and modifications take place incessantly. The three *gunas* in their various modification reflect the pure consciousness of *Purusa* in various ways and proportions in accordance with their predominance in different cases. *Sattva* represents consciousness and *Tamas* mass whereas *rajas* in

its mediating role is in-between these two extremes. Sankhya offers an elaborate picture of the process of Prakrti's teleological evolutes. But for the sake of precision and relevance, it will be adequate to mention here that the evolution of nature- the five gross elements such as earth, water, fire, air and ether as well as the psychical and kinetic elements of all kinds of organism such as mind, ego, sense organs and motor organs constituting the objects and subjects of knowledge- are material in essence and reflect pure consciousness not in its primal changelessness, but in its continuous changing process in accordance with its various association with the material transformation of Prakrti. Vacaspati Mishra (9th c. AD.) writes:

The reals(*gunas*) have two forms, viz, the determiner or the perceiver, and the perceived or the determined. In the aspect of the determined or the perceived, the *gunas* evolve themselves as the five infra-atomic potentials, the five gross elements and their compounds. In the aspect of the perceiver or determiner, they form the modification of the ego together with the senses.

It is now clear how all the objects and organisms of the world share a common ontology- they are all material differing only, in the proportion of the combination of the *gunas*. A living being differs from a piece of stone only on the ground that in the former *sattva* and *rajas* predominate while ' in the latter *tamas* is the predominant *guna*. Similarly, a man differs from other animals as well as from other members of his species in terms of the nature of the compounds of *gunas*. Each and every particle of this world is meaningful only in its relation to the others. The Saussurean linguistic structure upon which Levi-Strauss builds up his notion of ecological structure should basically reflect this Sankhya system of Prakrti. The reciprocation among the evolutes of nature is essential inasmuch as it is very much inherent in the very common ontology of the ecosystem. Since the real or physical environment forms a part of the geographical or virtual environment, it is necessary that the latter should not distort the former in any way that it would violate the minimum principles of their co-existence. Prakrti intends the coexistence of all the evolutes. Any violation or exploitation from any side will go against its teleology causing sinister disaster.

Having thus discovered an ontological unity of both matter and mind, of the perceived and the perceiver one understands the unity of the known and the knower as suggested by the Sankhya system. The knower's mind assumes the form of the known; consequently, such an epistemological stance justifies man's preception of natural beauty as an engagement or participation or what we call "immersion" where the dualism of experience is abolished. But the question is : how could the Sankhya system, advocating an inherent dualism, successfully account for a non-dual epistemology? The answer to this question is offered by the very teleology of Prakrti's evolution. It seems Sankhya's dualism is only apparent. In accepting the dualism of Purusa and Prakrti Sankhya also considers the primacy of Purusa and contingency of Prakrti, i.e., Sankhya says that the evolution of Prakrti is meant for the liberation of Purusa from its bondage in the materialist structure of Prakrti. One must avoid the apparent self-contradiction involved in this view. One might ask if Purusa is independent of Prakrti, how is it that it is in bondage? True, Purusa the pure consciousness is not at all in any kind of bondage. It is one, absolute, free from all bondage

of relativism caused by the *gunas* of Prakṛti. It transcends all *gunas* of Prakṛti. But when Puruṣa charges Prakṛti with its consciousness in order that Prakṛti may start evolution, *sattva* the translucent element of Prakṛti reflects this Puruṣa in manifold ways by virtue of its various combinations. In fact, it is this Puruṣa-in-reflection which is in bondage, not the real one; and the question of liberation arises only in the case of these reflections, the nature of which is described as only -ness (*Kaivalya*), i.e., the experience or knowledge of these reflected puruṣas (*mark the small 'p'*) that they are not many, but only one. Another point to be marked - the distance or proximity of these two realities Puruṣa and Prakṛti of which Sāṅkhya speaks is only metaphorical, meant to explain a situation which is otherwise inexplicable in language. The question of time and space arises only in the case of Prakṛti's evolution. Both of them are only material categories necessary for explaining the relativism of Prakṛti's material structure. They are simply meaningless outside the manifest nature. Of course a concrete and convincing answer to this puzzle has not been given by the pioneering philosophers of Sāṅkhya such as Iśvarakṛṣṇa (2nd c. A.D.) or Kapila (9th c. AD.). But the situation appears clear in the later thinkers of this school as well as in the other branches of orthodox Indian philosophy and the later interpretations available in the mythical narratives of *purānas*. Puruṣa is understood as the primary reality of which Prakṛti is the creative aspect or energy. Prakṛti is as real as Puruṣa, not any illusion or *māya*. Vacaspati writes: "Prakṛti is like the *māya* but it is not *māya*. It is trifling in the sense that it is changing. Just as *māya* constantly changes, so the transformations of Prakṛti are every moment appearing and vanishing and thus suffering momentary changes. Prakṛti being eternal is real and thus different from *māya*."⁷ Abhinavagupta (10th A.D.) also upholds the reality or truth of Prakṛti.⁸ According to him, the very essence of nature is its changefulness; and this change, the essence of nature, is also a kind or aspect of the ultimate or primary reality (Puruṣa of Sāṅkhya and Paramasiva of Kashmir Saivism) in its manifested form. Manifestation (or creation) and unmanifestation (or desolution) do not follow each other chronologically. They are rather simultaneous occurrences explaining the essential changefulness of Prakṛti.

It is this continuous process of eternal change in Prakṛti, its appearance or representation every moment in new forms, which constitutes 'beauty' of nature. Magha, the eminent epic poet in Sanskrit (9th c. A.D.) explains natural beauty exactly along this line in his poem *Sisupalavadha*.⁹ Kṛṣṇa, the king of Dvārīka is on the way to Indraprastha for attending a royal ceremony of sacrifice. At the sunset he enjoys the beauty of landscape - a big hill named Raivataka is flanked by the setting sun in the west and the rising moon in the east, both of them looking like two bells tied to the neck of an elephant, i.e., the hill. The poet says in the mouth of Kṛṣṇa that the beauty (of nature) consists in the ever new forms that nature assumes every moment. The justification of this simile does not lie only in the imagination of the perceiver as a fictional form; it is also a *quality* of the perceived which is responsible for creating (or reflecting) the simile in the mind of the perceiver. In other words, man's experience of beauty in nature is due to an ecological symbiosis that is rooted in the ontological identity of both these phenomena—man and nature.

III

But what is the case with the beauty of art ? It is commonly believed that the word 'art' in its Latin derivation denotes an artifice, a man-made thing, manipulation of materials of nature such as metal, stone, wood, sound and colour which aims at transforming or transfiguring their original/ordinary/commonplace appearances. Art stands in opposition to nature both semantically and functionally; and accordingly, aesthetics, despite its traditional meaning of appreciation of natural beauty, of the sublime in nature, in the writings of Kant and Schelling, is established today as the philosophy of art that aims at exploring the nature and meaning of art in general, and of the individual art forms in particular. But recently Arnold Berelant has proposed to bridge up this gap, this discrimination in order to formulate aesthetics as "a universal category, not *the* universal category but the omnipresent concept of a pervasive feature of experience" ¹⁰ so as to accommodate both art and nature in equal terms.

How far this utopia can be actualized ? Can there be a single principle of judging and appreciating both nature and art ? Since judgment is a necessary function of aesthetic appreciation, is there any sense in claiming *judgment* of natural beauty by human beings ? Aristotle has emphatically distinguished between nature and art, a man-made object with a quality which we may call "aesthetic" on the point that art is an artificial reproduction of nature. In spite of a common ontology, art differs from nature in two respects : first, it is a representation, and secondly, this representation, instead of being merely a replica of nature, may improve over it, i.e., it may bring to completion what is incomplete in nature. Beauty of art lies in these two distinct qualities which are the very criteria of appreciating as well as judging works of art. These qualities also determine our response to them defining, in a way, this response as "aesthetic". Arthur Danto specifies our responses to an artwork and to an object of nature or to a man-made object which is not an art work, and these specifications are based on differences in qualities. He writes :

learning it is a work of art means that it has qualities to attend to which its untransfigured counterpart lacks, and that our aesthetic responses will be different. And this is not institutional, it is ontological. We are dealing with an altogether different order of things.... a work of art has great many qualities, indeed a great many qualities of a different sort altogether, than the qualities belonging to objects materially undiscernible from them but not themselves art works. And some of these qualities may very well be aesthetic ones, or qualities one can experience aesthetically or find "worthy and valuable" ? But then in order to respond aesthetically to these, one must first know that the object is an art work, and hence the distinction between what is art and what is not is presumed available before the difference in response to that difference in identity is possible.... there are two orders of aesthetic response, depending upon whether the response is to an artwork or to a mere real thing that cannot be told apart from it. ¹¹

It appears therefore difficult to agree with Berleant that both art and nature (Danto's 'mere real thing') can be accommodated in equal terms. Particularly, judgment as an inevitable part of aesthetic appreciation cannot function in case of nature which is not an inten-

tional object like a man-made artwork. Indian aestheticans have discriminated between nature and art and have prescribed different modes of appreciation for these two altogether different phenomena.

IV

Nature and art share a common material ontology; but so far as qualities are concerned they are of two different orders of things. The earliest Indian concept of art available in the Vedas is that of an 'image' (*silpa*) a counter form (*pratirupa*) of natural phenomenon.¹² Later, in the pre-Christian era idea of art as a man-made artificial object is noted; and as early as the 4th c.B.C. Bharata's idea of the theatrical performance as a 'toy' also corroborates the idea of art as an intentional object meant for learning or enlightenment through entertainment. The drama is discriminated from nature for its representational quality insofar as it is not an object or event of nature, but a deliberate imitation (representation) of the events and objects of nature both in its manifest and unmanifest forms. The criteria for appreciation of the dramatic art are also based on its representational qualities. Abhinavagupta a commentator on Bharata points to the distinct attitude of the dramatic audience.¹³ Before entering an auditorium the audience is fully aware of the fact that what he is going to witness is a representation of nature, an intentional performance of an event by a group of human beings, through their gestures, postures dialogues in accompaniment with costume, and all other histrionic devices including facial expressions. He is aware that he is not going to see any environmental phenomenon, either real or virtual, a mountain, a flood, a battle or a garden or even a conjugal love or quarrel. He is aware that what the actors or actresses would be doing on the stage are not at all concerned with them personally. They would be *acting* (*abhinaya*) behaving in a way clearly connoting *representing/projecting/illustrating* certain archetypal characters, situations, relationships. This awareness of the audience might be called "aesthetic attitude" in recent vocabulary. This aesthetic attitude is not purely a subjective phenomenon since it depends upon the very quality of the object that the audience is experiencing. This awareness of the audience also makes aesthetic appreciation and judgment possible. What the audience judges is not the degree of resemblance of the representation with the represented, because he knows that the represented object is only intentional (fictional). He has neither seen it nor has he any necessity for seeing it. Bharata has strictly instructed that all the represented objects must be intentional, non-existent at least during the life-span of the audience so that none of them should have a chance of perceiving it directly.¹⁴ The plots and characters of the drama must be taken from either myths or remote history. By doing this, confusion of art and reality (nature) shall be avoided. It must be borne in mind that art is a man-made object which resembles nature only in its kind (*sajatyā*); by no means it is a reproduction simply because man cannot reproduce nature. Any attempt at confusing art with nature will destroy the very purpose of art. Whatever may be the degree of realism, art should not produce any illusion of reality, and it does not do so because the audience is already aware that he is or would be perceiving art, not reality (nature).

What the audience appreciates is therefore, not the degree of resemblance of art with nature, rather the degree of art's (or the artist's) success in *particularising/projecting/*

illustrating the general or archetypal patterns of nature in all its spheres of phenomena. Obviously this appreciation involves judgment and criticism. The very fact that different performing arts represent (or present/perform) musical composition, (dance) rhythm or subject differently, and the very fact that they are always expected to do that prove the truth of Abhinava's argument that these several representations of the same text etc. are particularizations of general patterns. Aesthetic judgment necessarily involves the answer to the question : how far which representation particularizes the same general pattern in what way? Criticism even by way of suggestions for improvement is possible only in those cases where the critic is sure that the maker of the work he criticizes is accessible to his criticism and the work is fully under the control of the maker for further modification. Obviously, this type of criticism is meaningless in case of appreciation of nature, at least in case of real environment. The case of virtual environment is slightly different in that it is open for criticism of the audience. The man-made environment as it is - the artificial lake, for example, planted forest, garden and the villa constructed with an architectural style matching symmetrically with the entire environment—its appreciation is slimmer to the appreciation of a landscape painting. The viewer can utilize this environment and the designer can also modify it accordingly. In aesthetic experience appreciation and critical judgment are simultaneous necessary functions. Even in case of experiencing real environment, say, in the case of Magha's description of the Raivataka hill referred to above, the simile is an art-form conferred upon the environment by the viewer. In fact, all such literary devices are different forms of the writer's aesthetic vision conferred on the objects of his description. According to the Indian thinkers, all such appreciations are self-immersion (Berleant's participation'). Abhinavagupta read along with the Sankhya metaphysics and epistemology would come to a point that aesthetic appreciation is possible when in an audience *sattva* predominates so that his limited consciousness or ego (*ahamkara*) is elevated to an extraordinary level - not exactly to the level of the absolute consciousness or Purusa the primary reality, where the experience would be the mystic experience of salvation (*kaivalya*), i.e., absolute identity of the purusa and Purusa. On the other hand, aesthetic experience is as homogeneous (*ekaghana*) as the mystic one, but lacks its harshness (*parusata*). Abhinavagupta writes :

Aesthetic enjoyment consists in the tasting of one's own consciousness; this tasting endowed with extreme pleasantness (beauty) which it obtains from a contact with the various latent traces of pleasure, pain etc. It differs both from ordinary perception, which is full of obstacles (pragmatic requirements, etc.), and from the perception of the yogins, which is not free from harshness, on account of the total lack of any tasting of external objects.¹⁵

The mystic experience of salvation is absolutely devoid of any *guna*; but aesthetic experience is predominated by *sattva guna*, the quality or the material constituent of nature which purges man's emotions of their impurities, i.e., pleasure, pain and indifference in connection with the experience of the ordinary natural phenomena. When mystic experience is devoid of all emotions, aesthetic experience is coloured (*anuranjita*) by these purified emotions.¹⁶ To put it precisely, aesthetic experience is nothing but the experience of

these purified emotions as they are presented in artworks (particularly in the drama), never in reality. Because only an artwork can present an emotion in its generic form so as to make it relishable for the audience.

Understood in this light, aesthetic experience of nature *per se* is a contradiction in terms. Whenever there is any such experience, one must be aware that the viewer confers an art form on the environment in question. It is exactly on this point that Bhattanayaka (10th c.A.D.) a commentator on Bharata suggests for an enjoyment of the whole world as a drama (*jagannatyam*).¹⁷ This is an alternative for the yogic method of mystic experience - a method of experiencing reality as an artwork. Experience of Drama lasts for a few hours. But experiencing reality as a dramatic performance is everlasting. When Vatsyayana (3rd c.A.D.) proposes for an aestheticization of the life-style of a citizen¹⁸, he also means the same--transformation or transfiguration of the hundreds of man's life into an artwork. Obviously, this aestheticization has a practical merit : it prompts the promotion of human value in reducing man's selfcentric attitude to the external world, minimizing thereby many of man's psychological and sociological crises.

V

Coming back to the Sankhya view of nature as a teleological manifestation, one might interpret that since nature is the paradigm of all creations, particularly for its expressiveness and perfection of form, natural beauty should be the ideal of artistic beauty. Even Vijnanabhiksu (16th C.A.D.) argues that a statue had already been there in the stone : "just as the image already existing in the stone is only manifested by the activity of the statuary, so the causal activity also generates only that activity by which an effect is manifested as if it happened or came into being at the present moment".¹⁹ The statement implies that since nature is inclusive of both subject and object, making, maker and made, man's making is only secondary or a metaphorical function. In fact, man being a part of nature man's making is practically nature's making. All the man-made things actually preexist in nature in a latent state. Its manifestation by human agency is practically the manifestation of man's ego or *ahamkara*. In this view, art is not altogether a new presence. It is rather a presentation (manifestation/ publication) of the artist's subject or ego. The seventeenth-century neo-Platonic view that beautiful natural objects are parts of the organic process of nature holds good in this Sankhya context. Each phenomenon must be experienced in the structural context of nature as a whole, not in piece-meal. If both the artwork and the artist are parts of nature, then in what way does the experience of these two differ ? Sankhya's holistic view is meaningful when the subject-object dichotomy is totally ignored as in the case of an individual *purusa* who has obtained salvation or *kaivalya* (only-ness). For him experience of nature and experience of art are both meaningless. On the other hand, although for Sankhya, milk and curd are materially the same, they are nevertheless two different phenomena. Similarly, if art is a manifestation of nature, it is different from all other phenomena. Taste of milk and curd is certainly not the same. Art is a part of nature; but as a man-made object it differs from natural phenomena; for its very artifactuality it is artificial. Environmental aesthetics cannot equate the experience of environment and art. They may be materially the same, but they differ in qualities or *gunas*. Man's experience of these two, therefore, differs

qualitatively. Environmental aesthetics can justify itself either by conferring an art form on environment or by designing environment as an artwork.

Notes and References

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14. *Natyasastra*, I.57; see Abhinavagupta's commentary on these stanzas, particularly on 57.
15. English translation by Gnoli; see Gnoli, op.cit, p.83; for other references see pp. 72,73,82,84
16. Gnoli, op.cit., p.72
17. Abhinavagupta's commentary on *Natyasastra* I.1
18. *Kamasutra* I.4
19. Vijnanabhiksu's commentary on *Sankhyasutra* of Kapila entitled *Sankhyapravacanabhasya*, I.120, English translation by S.N. Dasgupta, *Yoga as Philosophy and Religion*, p.4