

The Contemporary Relevance of Indian Aesthetics : Some Reflections

M.S.KUSHWAHA

Although there has been a gradual awakening of interest in Indian aesthetics¹ in academic circles², the doubts still persist (even amongst its advocates) about its relevance for the present-day scholar or literary artist. And they are not totally unfounded. Indian aesthetics, however rich, is a thing of the past. It was the product of a culture or *weltanschauung* which has almost disappeared or radically changed. Our literatures in modern Indian languages are not only basically different in character but also shaped and conditioned by western influences. How can Indian aesthetics, which is grounded in a 'dead' literature, help us in appreciating the living literatures which are predominantly western in temper and technique ?

The neo-champions of Indian aesthetics are trying to counter this argument with their efforts to demonstrate the validity and viability of the ancient literary theories. They intend to prove that the theories expounded by Indian aestheticians are not only better suited to the appreciation of Indian literature but are also universally valid, and can profitably be applied to western literature, perhaps the national seminar on "Indian and Western Poetics at Work" organised by the Sahitya Akademi at Dhvanyaloka, Mysore in 1991 was prompted by such considerations. The emphasis was on applying Indian literary theories to modern literary texts, both Indian and Western. There were several papers by distinguished scholars but none, however, was able to establish the efficacy of Indian literary theories convincingly.³

Such an exercise can hardly succeed, for it is based on false premises. It presupposes the existence of a stable universe which is governed by fixed and universal laws. Once these laws are discovered, they can always be applied without any misgivings. And since they have already been discovered by our ancient thinkers and writers, we have to do nothing but study and follow them. This is exactly the view which the Augustan critics like Pope⁴ propagated with great force but which has since been discredited. Science has proved that there is nothing permanent or steadfast in this universe which itself is in a state of constant flux. Literature is no exception to this process of change and no theory, however catholic, can hope to meet the new challenges without constantly updating itself.

Perhaps the very criterion of testing the relevance of an ancient theory by applying it to modern situations is not proper. Its relevance lies not in its adequacy but in its being part of our tradition. In our tradition we have our roots, and we cannot grow unless we relate to them. They provide the necessary nourishment. But it will be foolish to identify ourselves with our roots and refuse to grow up. The roots are indispensable, but not enough. We need also light and air for our growth. In fact, it is the constant interaction between the internal and external forces which shapes our development.

It is necessary to relate to our tradition because it gives us our identity and provides the *terra firma* on which we can build our home. Unrelated, we remain parasites. The relationship, however, does not entail any restriction on our freedom. Tradition is always open to experiment and innovation. In fact, they are essential for its survival. When it becomes static, it dies. The history of Indian aesthetics itself offers the best evidence of this fact. For more than two thousand years, from Bharata to Panditaraja Jagannatha, it had a glorious and unbroken tradition which was marked by an independent spirit of inquiry. But afterwards this spirit of inquiry declined and stagnation set in. Gradually the tradition came to an end.

There is no way of reviving that tradition now, but by relating to it we can revitalize our critical inquiry. Indian aesthetics, if approached in the right spirit, can help us in developing a genuine Indian literary criticism. So long the literary criticism in this country has been almost entirely dependent on western models or guided by them.⁵ But what has it gained? of thousands of critical works in English by Indian scholars, not more than a dozen or so figure in the latest bibliographical guide published by Penguin Books, *A Guide for Readers* (1984). To some extent, this may be due to the prejudice of English scholars or their un-willingness to accord recognition to their Indian counterparts, but it can hardly be denied that this may be also due to lack of an authentic voice on the part of our scholars. Since they were cut off from their tradition, they could scarcely develop their own thinking. The tradition gives strength to stand on one's own feet. Only a scholar who is rooted in his tradition can meet a scholar of another tradition with authority and assurance. One without a tradition has no roots to hold on; he or she is easily swayed or carried away. Tradition gives us not only strength but also a distinctive authentic voice. And it makes a world of difference when we speak in our true voice. *A History of English Literature* by Legouis and Cazamian offers perhaps the best example of the impact that a genuine voice does make. Though written by French scholars, it succeeded in winning a distinctive place amongst the histories of English literature simply

because it reflected the distinctive genius of a people. There is no reason why an Indian scholar, who writes about English literature, should fail to win recognition. The only condition is that he must write as an Indian. Sri Aurobindo's *The Future Poetry* holds a promise.

And what Sri Aurobindo himself did is a lesson for every Indian scholar in English. He was almost a foreigner when he returned to his country, but he soon realized the need of relating to his roots and studied Sanskrit language and literature. It was this study which shaped his vision and lent a striking originality to his work. His western scholarship, however vast, could hardly make him so distinguished. For real growth is possible only when one is related to one's roots.

Indian aesthetics can provide roots to Indian scholars and help them grow. Its insights will lead them to further exploration and discovery. And once they are firmly rooted, they will be in a position to respond to and interact with other currents of thought authentically and fruitfully. It is only at this stage that a cross-fertilization takes place, resulting in enrichment and furtherance of the parent tradition.

For western scholars, too, Indian aesthetics is equally relevant. It can help broadening their outlook which is almost wholly conditioned by western tradition. It is a well-known fact that many western creative writers have benefited from their acquaintance with Indian philosophy and culture. It is also established that Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, profited greatly from his study of Indian grammatical thought. There is every reason to believe that an interaction with Indian aesthetics will prove no less beneficial. Its ideas and concepts (i.e., *Rasa*, *Dhvani*, *Vakrokti*, *Sadharanikarana*, *Sahrdaya*) are bound to enrich the western critical tradition. It is really unfortunate that western literary scholars and critics have so far made no deliberate attempt to explore and exploit the insights of Indian aesthetics. Even T. S. Eliot, who is believed to have been influenced by the *rasa* doctrine⁶, makes no explicit reference to Indian literary theories. And though Susanne K. Langer (*Feeling and Form*) mentions the concept of *rasa*, her treatment is also nothing but casual. This pervading indifference to the western literary scholars or aestheticians is most probably due to two reasons: they suffer either from some deep-rooted prejudice or from some misconception. May be they think that there is nothing worthwhile in Indian aesthetics or that it belongs to the domain of orientalists. But both the positions are untenable. A tradition, however remote in time and place, never becomes old or meaningless; it contains in itself the seeds of regeneration and recovery. It is always relevant to the present simply because the present is the child of the past.

There may or may not be any immediate gain from the study of Indian aesthetics, but it is not as important as its far-reaching effect. It is no less a means of self-discovery than a stimulus to critical thought.

Notes and References

1. Indian aesthetics (the term "aesthetics" has been superimposed by western thought) refers to a body of Sanskrit writings on literary theory and criticism. In the beginning there were two currents of Indian aesthetics, one relating to drama called "*Natyasastra*" and another relating to poetry and other literary forms called "*alankarasastra*". In the course of time this distinction was obliterated and Indian aesthetics, comprising both poetry and drama, came to be known simply by "*alankarasastra*" or "*sahityasastra*".
2. Among the recent studies in Indian aesthetics the following are most noteworthy: *Sanskrit Criticism* by V. K. Chari (Honolulu : Hawaii University, 1990); Indian poetics by Edwin Geroow in *A History of Indian Literature* ed. Jan Gonda, Vol. 5, Faqsc.3; and the English translation of *Dhvanyaloka* with *Locana* by Daniel H. H. Ingalls et al. (Harvard Oriental Series, Vol. 49).
3. The proceedings of the seminar have lately come out under the title *East West Poetics at Work* edited by C. D. Narasimhaiah (New Delhi : Sahitya Akademi, 1994).
4. Cf. Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*. (London : Macmillan & Co., 1960). especially the following lines :

Those Rules of old discovered, not devis'd,
Are Nature still, but Nature methodiz'd.

.... ..
Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem;
To copy Nature is to copy them. (11.88.9; 139-40)

5. The first book of literary criticism designed for postgraduate students of Hindi, Babu Shyam Sunder Das's *Sahityalochan*, was an adaptation of Hudson's *An Introduction to the Study of Literature*.
6. Eliot's concept of "objective correlative" is obviously a restatement of the Indian concept of *vibhava-s*. See also Lee T. Lemon, "T. S. Eliot's Other Tradition". *Journal of Literary Criticism*, 5:1 (June, 1989), pp. 1-9