

Asian Confluences and Convergences of Poetry, Philosophy & Aesthetics

We are not at all surprised to hear the constant refrain in different seminars and conferences about the advantage of dialogue of civilizations particularly in view of the ominous forecasts that in future the clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.....the most prominent group is the Islamic fundamentalist connection that has emerged to challenge Western interests, values and power and threaten global peace and harmony. It is true that there are ample signs of cultural conflicts between the traditional East and the West, as well as among the three Abrahamic traditions, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and hence it has become all the more necessary to respond with renewed efforts to counter the clash of civilizations with a dialogue among civilizations.

One of the important aspects of dialogue is to know each other, each other's culture and also their creativity and meditative thought. In this paper, an attempt is made to

understand the Asian confluences and convergences of poetry, philosophy and aesthetics particularly with reference to India, China and Japan. However, Aesthetics is kept more in focus than poetry and philosophy though both are indispensable parts of aesthetics. In 1924, Tagore visited China to give a series of lectures. While introducing him to the academic audience Liang Chi Chao, President, Universities Association, Peking said that India and China were both devoted to the cause of the universal truth, we set out to fulfill the destiny of mankind, we felt the necessity for cooperation. Let me quote here what Tagore said about Asia during that visit :

“In Asia we must seek our strength in union, in an unwavering faith in righteousness, and never in the egotistic spirit of separateness and self assertion. It is from the heart of the East that the utterance has sprung forth : ‘The meek shall inherit the earth.’ For the meek never waste energy in the display and insolence, but are firmly established in true prosperity through harmony with the all.”

While talking about the Tao, or 'Way' a construct that is often mentioned as the ultimate referent of art and art criticism in China, one can realise that what Tagore calls meek, Tao explains the same with the help of paradoxes. Lao Tse says," Blessed are those who are ready to be last. In fact, there are two types : Those who go in front and those who prefer to stay behind." The latter are born once a while – Buddha, a Lao-Tse, a Christ. Those who surge forward their number is great. Those who stay behind are people who are ego free, they hold knowledge to be useless, action superfluous, desire harmful and glory and wealth worthless. A man may live true to nature, and nature may point him to happiness. "In the deepest stillness, where the mind is completely void and silent, there alone lies its excellence". The rule of the intellect is to break; and the result of breaking is confusion. If you want to save yourself from entanglements do not break. If you do not want to break, discard the intellect. When the intellect is dropped, non-distinction arises. Hence is East-Asian aesthetics it is made clear that the aesthetic sensibilities incline towards the understated, the evocative, the lyrical, with an interest in negative capability and quite surface. The ideal in painting

is the hidden and obscure, in music the inaudible, in acting the motionless, in poetry the unstated. Painting is best in monochrome, music best in song for one or two, poetry best in the fleeting sigh of the brief lyric. The aesthetic refines the human capability to live artfully, to create art and to perceive the true and beautiful in art and nature – something always there, but rarely perceived. In other words, Tao or the Way with reference to Aesthetics makes three important points :-

- 1) Impersonality is a very important factor in creativity.
- 2) It is not intellect but emotion which helps the poet in his creative act and
- 3) The meaning of an artistic expression is always hidden within the art form and therefore it is said that the meaning of an artistic expression is not denotative but evocative or suggestive.

In the Indian poetics, personality or individuality is always subordinated to the universal. In fact, in the oriental arts especially in India, Japan and China the most important thing is the universal soul. Because we have faith in this

universal soul we in the east know that Truth, Power, Beauty, lie in simplicity – where it is transparent, where things do not obstruct the inner vision. The idea of life in a creative act is not a mere logical deduction; it is as real to the poet as the air to the bird who feels it at every beat of its wing. Tagore says that we have often heard the Indian mind described by Western critics as metaphysical, because it is ready to soar in the infinite. But it has to be noted that the infinite is not a mere matter of philosophical speculation to India; it is as real to her as the sunlight. She must see it, feel it, make use of it in her life. The poet of the Upanishads has said that the slightest movement of life would be impossible if the sky were not filled with infinite joy. This universal presence was as much a reality to India as the earth under her feet, nay, even more. In other words, in place of intellectualism, transcendental feeling is the core of a creative act but at the same time in India, the creative act maintains an internal poetic logic, but emancipates itself from material reality. Emancipation from objective reality does not imply emancipation from meaning. This meaning maintains a claim to truth while defying a direct comparison with reality. The *rasa* model of India in its ultimate effect

unites emotion with meaning and does not accept the distinction between reason and passions. Every passion contains its own quantum of reason. Hence it is a complex experience, pleasant in essence in which the emotion and intellectual elements are blended in a subtle harmony. The Buddha images of Sarnath of the 5-6 Cen. AD showing the attainment of *bodhi* or supreme wisdom that cuts asunder the darkness and radiates illumination are examples of India's quest in the realm of creative imagination and intellect for an aesthetic experience. Up to a certain point logic helps, beyond this, logic has to go. If you want to argue with Shankara, the greatest explicator of vedanta philosophy you will be defeated. Shankara travelled all over India, and he defeated thousands of scholars. This was his whole life's work, to go and defeat people. And still he was very illogical. In the morning, you would find him arguing so logically that the greatest logicians would look childish. And in the evening, you would find him praying and dancing in the temple and crying and weeping like a child, unbelievable. He had written one of the most beautiful prayers and somebody asked, 'How can you write such beautiful prayers? You are such a logician. How can you be

so emotional that you cry and weep and tears fall down. He said, my intuition is not against my logic, my intuition is beyond my logic. My logic has some function to fulfill. I go with it whole-heartedly, but then there comes a moment when it cannot go beyond – and I have to go beyond it too.

In India, it is *rasa*, which is the ultimate referent to art and art criticism. The *rasa* modal is not concerned with the objective situation in literature, but with the effect, it creates. It is not concerned with the content, but with the process by which the content is formulated. The process is *vyapara* and the *rasa* model intensifies the idea that art is an activity, and not the physical art object, so it is not the signifier (referent), but the signified that is important in the creative text. *Rasa* also does not express, but suggests and hence the pivot is *dhvani*. In *dhvani*, things are suggested, they are not clear, and that is its beauty. See the *Tribhanga* pose of Krishna – because of the curve, the object is not linear, and that adds to the beauty of Krishna. Something always remains hidden. *Dhvani* is recoding the performance text by the consciousness of the perceivers, so that the spectators have multiple experiences. So it is said that the

suggested *rasadi* may vary from one *rasika* to another, depending upon his sensibility and taste, though there is a modicum of commonness in aesthetic value.

East Asian Traditions are rich in the achievements of artistic geniuses, yet there is little premium put on individuality and the expression of individual personal feeling. Excellence resides in perfection of skills, mastery of the principles of an art genre, and submission to the inner order of the world. Artistic geniuses are praised for “attaining the spiritual”, being adept in all elements of the ‘Six Laws’, being, perfect in the subtleties of form, achieving resonance and grace and the like. In other words, the East Asian aesthetics in matter of creativity takes into account the aspect of form or technique with great seriousness.

In Indian Aesthetics, technique is equally important. The realisation of Aesthetic bliss or *rasa* by a spectator is possible (i) by the proper combination or dynamic inter-relationship of different constituents, (ii) by imaginative recreation of the world of actuality into the world of poetry and (iii) by the use of presentational style (*natya dharmita*).

All these are inter-linked with the central problem of art, which is a matter of technique. The technique or the process of transforming a 'real' context into an aesthetic context is to make a moment of the artist's experience come to life in minds other than his own.

Rasa, therefore, is the concretisation of an experience into an art form whose reality and effect are dependent upon the skill or technique with which the writer creates his world out of the raw material available to him. This proves the literariness of an artifact.

The creator of the compendium of theatre, Bharata does not make the mistake of regarding technique as something autonomous, because the purpose of theatre or Art is not to be, but to arouse a corresponding experience in the mind of the critical observer (*sumanas* or *prekshaka*) which is ultimately transformed into an extra-worldly state (*alaukikavastha*) called *rasa*. In Indian aesthetics, beauty lies in the experience of a particular kind of harmony. It is the harmony of the form with the content giving us a certain unique transcendental feeling. The East Asian aesthetics is

keen for the inner order of the creative world and also for attaining the spiritual. In Indian aesthetics, it is said that the inner order is just not the harmony between content and form but perception of the unity in the universe. Creativity takes place because it is the universe, the divine that enters in you to create and then all of a sudden one realises that there is a world within, there is an empire within, a vastness, a sky - somebody in that vastness signals and creativity takes place. This is what is known as attaining the spiritual when the creator is in a non-mind state and this stage is possible when one goes beyond one's needs, one's desires then only the divine enters in you. The meaning is that man expresses himself through his superabundance which largely overlaps his absolute need. Tagore says "The voice that is just enough can speak and cry to the extent needed for everyday use, but that which is abundant sings, and in it we find our joys."

The East Asian Aesthetics gives quite a lot of importance to the concept of innovation, which, it says, resides more in the personality and life of the artist than in his art. This reflects that the artists and their efforts are a

more crucial locus of the aesthetic than the outcome-that is, the performance or objects themselves. Hence, both in Chinese and Japanese aesthetics the focus is on innate endowments, inner self-cultivation, reclusive lifestyles and the interactions between the artist and the outside world.

The Sanskrit aesthetics was disinterested in the poetic personality by which a work of art attains its particular shape and individual character. They never bothered themselves about the poetic imagination, which gave each a distinct and unique shape in a fusion of impressions into an organic whole. However there is uniform recognition of *pratibha* (talent) as an important requisite for poetic creation and visual art and music. It is also a power, a spark that triggers a poem conveying new, wonderful and charming combinations and relations of words and things. It is not universal, since it does not belong to many persons; the poetic flame is not lit in all souls. In some people *pratibha* flowers from the grace of God and of great men, but in others it flowers from proficiency and practice, and it is through this creative propensity that poetry comes into

being. In this respect India, China and Japan have uniformity of approach to the question of creativity.

The major religious and philosophical traditions of confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and Shintoism have all contributed to definitions of the Way or Tao and to the aesthetics of East Asia. The Chinese mind was from very early times molded by the philosophy of Tao, which sought to look into the basic unity behind life just as did the Indian mind. If the Upanishad says, Yasyamatam tasyamatam matam yasya naveda sah, Avigyatam Vijanatam, Vigyatamavijanatam, To whom it is unknown, to him it is known and to whom it is known, he does not know it. In Tao Te Ching a similar sentiment is revealed, he who knows (The Tao) does not (care to) speak (about it); he who is (ever ready to) speak about it does not know it. Both the Upanishads and Tao Te Ching are very clear on this matter : that which we know is knowledge, what we do not know is ignorance, but the mystery lies in knowing that I do not know.

Zeami, a celebrated theorist of Japanese aesthetics of the medieval time stresses that the audience and its response are as integral to art as the playwright, actor or painter. In Indian aesthetics, as explained earlier, the conscious perceiver recodes the text, so that the spectators have multiple experiences and therefore *rasa* refers mainly to the spectators state of aesthetic enjoyment, it is a spectator-oriented theory. However, the spectator's very ability to apprehend n-order meaning in his recoding of the performance text depends upon :

- 1) The linguistic representation or the form of the text has the qualities to attract the spectator;
- 2) The subject matter does not go against the universal value system or poetic truth.

These are the two riders and because of this the *rasa*-theory maintains some kind of objectivity and therefore, though *rasa* refers mainly to the spectator's state of aesthetic enjoyment, it is virtually referred to as existing in the locus of the aesthetic object. In other words the creative moment or the poet is not ignored but aesthetic

experience manifested by the poetic word does not contain a cause and effect relationship with that which precedes and follows it but marks, as it were, a magical break in the web of relationship of which everyday life *samsara* is woven and hence it is a wonder flower (*adhbhutpuspa*) as mentioned by Abhinavagupta and also equated with *chamatkara* (a source of wonder).

Surprisingly much of the discussion of performance in the *no*, theatre including issues like training, imitation, verisimilitude and balance, is also related to a metaphor of flower. The celebrated theorist of Japanese aesthetics, Zeami draws a contrast between substance and function, compared to a flower and its scent or the moon and its light. The essential concept in Zeami's treatises is *Yugen*, which follows the dynamics of contrast. The central metaphor was a flower blooming on a rock or a dead tree. The highest art gives rise to feeling of *aware* or melancholy elegance or what the great novelist Tanizaki says the oriental propensity to seek beauty in darkness. The highest art mostly focuses on the moment the cherry blossom falls from the tree, the moment of passing of love and beauty, the touching of love

by death. The great heroes are those who show nobility at the moment of grand failure. Lao-Tzu does not see oppositions as hostile; he does not understand 'the contrary' as 'the opposite'. If you want to draw a white line, you need a black background, so it is mistaken to say white is the opposite of black. We have to make use of black in order to bring out white in all its distinction. Man & woman, fire and water, sky and earth all round us existence stands supported by these pairs of opposites. For Zen masters, the best way to express deepest experiences is by the use of paradoxes, which transcend the opposites. For example, "where there is nothing there is all", "To die the great death is to gain the great life," we have been separated for a long time and have never been apart". In Indian aesthetics, it is the mystic equality of the objects, which is to be found in any art expression. In the *Isha Upanishad* the *Pushana*, the nourishing sun, is asked to cast away his rays, to gather them in and give up radiating brilliance, so that one may behold the *Purusha* in the solar orb. It represents static and a dynamic state at one and the same time. It is the mystic equality, an eternal balance of opposite poles. In the book of Tao this is known as chi(qu), a state of harmony. It is

samattva, the mean where all contrasts are annulled. Mystic equality is another name of the *Sthitapragya* of the *Bhagwad Gita* because in achieving knowledge one cannot come close nor remain distant, one cannot take profit nor be harmed, one cannot gain honour nor suffer disgrace and therefore the way is the most prized thing in the world. Both opposites are allowed to be there within you, both are needed. Both will give you two wings and you can fly within yourself.

In rasa theory it is the process *vyapara* which is most crucial which intensifies the idea that art is an activity and not the physical art object. Zeami always emphasised on function rather than on substance and thereby giving rise throughout Japanese arts to a taste for the minimal. The actor is not to imitate real life in an obvious way but rather to capture the essential spirit of the role played. This has led to the use of stylization in poetry in *no* or *kabuki* theatre in a big way. Poetry forms are generally short, as are play scripts. The temperament is lyrical rather than epic. The Indian traditional theatre, Kathakali, Kootiyattam, yakshagan etc. are extremely stylized after all you are not watching life in these theatre but a bigger-than-life concept and a

heightened vision of reality. In Buddhist, philosophy power lies in the subtle and never in the mass. The void is a measureless store of energy where there is incalculable power. The Buddhist concept of *shunya* in which is absolute power. The most elegant Japanese calligraphy is a few bold strokes in the abbreviated 'grass' style conveying a formidable strength. There is nothing in the void, but everything comes out of it. The doctrine of the void (*sunyata*) is not nihilism but a true basis for the foundation of ethical values.

Asian aesthetics operate in the context of a well-integrated, holistic view of nature and humankind in which resides the Eternal Truth, which turns everything transcendental and establishes the spiritual unity of man. The Asian aesthetics is based on a civilization, which is not political but social, not predatory and mechanically efficient but spiritual and based upon all the varied and deeper relations of humanity.