

## CHAPTER X

### The Concept of Disinterestedness in Recent Indian Thought I

In the foregone Chapter we tried to look for a concept of disinterestedness within the Indian tradition. We found that disinterestedness has been understood or conceived of in terms of impersonality, non-attachment or non-egoity. These are all poises of the self, achievements of spiritual nature, and essentially liberating states of experience. It is also noticed, in endorsement of Hiriyanna's observation, that philosophical thinking has moulded the theory, if not the practice, of art in India. But it must not be surmised that aesthetics has been a hand-maiden of philosophy, it has worked independently. What is interesting is that both aesthetics and philosophy (by which we mean darsana proper) had a shared vision of the human enterprise : to attain detachment from the lure of the sensuous, to rise over gratification as well as nausea or boredom. A serene and disinterested contemplation of the facts of life has been held to be the end of art experience, Poetry, said Robert Frost, is 'momentary stay against confusion'. The idea has been familiar one in India. A part of the meaning of 'disinterestedness' in Kant is indifference to existence. Chhatta-Tauta makes it clear that there is no real existence of sense objects at all in art;

Viṣayābhāvato nātra rāgasyābhyasagādātā ! Prajnākaragupta, commenting on a passage in Dharmakīrti's Pramānavārtika asks the connoisseur to be an onlooker instead of an involved participant; tatasthatvena vedyate tatvenāvedanam bhavet<sup>2</sup>.

We had occasion to observe that in Kant's case disinterestedness was used as referring to judgment, while in India, the aesthetic experience<sup>3</sup> has been held, since Abhinavagupta, to be something immediate, not indirect<sup>4</sup>. It is produced by art, and it is detached, pure, not involved, does not arouse our everyday concerns but takes us away from them. It is universal or completely objective, marked by universalization or transcendence of particularity.

In the present Chapter I shall be concerned with the ideas of aesthetics and art in recent Indian Thought. The story of recent Indian thought is a fascinating one. It is a narrative of cultural adjustment and assimilation in a creative way. Our thinkers have moved back and forth between antiquity and modernity. This movement is valuable for our cultural identity, and hence deserves a closer study.

Rabindranath Tagore is a renaissance figure in recent Indian thought. His phenomenal creativity needs no mention. His thoughts on art and aesthetics as well as his philosophical

ideas are no less interesting for their fertility and modernisation of the tradition. Sri Aurobindo has been acclaimed as an original thinker, and his views on language derive their viability from his general position concerning the evolution of human consciousness. Art and more specifically the language of poetry, for Sri Aurobindo, are on the ontological ladder, and hence occupy a position of immense significance for man's spiritual destiny. Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya's essay "The Concept of Rasa" is at once a continuation and modification of the thesis of poetry as dhvani. And the position held in the essay presupposes Bhattacharyya's concept of subjectivity. He may be taken to have argued for marking the aesthetic experience off on the basis of the notion of spiritual subjectivity. Aesthetic experience is freedom through feeling distanced away from its object. In point of fact, Bhattacharyya's "The concept of Rasa" is a valued contribution to the body of scholarship on the literature rasa. We propose, in this and the following Chapters to see how Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya have formulated the notion of disinterestedness, and how far their ideas serve to bridge up the philosophical cultures of the East and the West.

Rabindranath Tagore

Speaking from the point of view of the history of aesthetic thought in India, there converge in Tagore two distinct notions

of art experience. The position of Abhinavagupta is well known. He stressed the point of universalization or transcendence of particularity. The individual, in course of aesthetic experience, forgets himself and thereby attains the highest happiness. The essence of rasa is that it is tasted, does not go beyond tasting. This line of thinking is there in Tagore, but with a difference, the polarity of I and Thou perhaps never gets lost, as it seems to be the case with Abhinavagupta. After him, the theory of Bhoj is the most important contribution to aesthetics providing an experimental basis to the discipline. Instead of universalization, Bhoj maintains that the highest aesthetic experience is a supreme form of self-assertion, ahamkāra<sup>5</sup>. This might be described as self-realization, the fullest development of the individual instead of his absorption into the universal. The opposition between Bhoj's and Abhinavagupta's theories depends on a metaphysical question of the nature of the self in relation to which the aesthetic experience, assertion or transcendence would take place. It may now be remarked that a dialectic of transcendence and ascertainment, the surplus in man and personality keep alternating in Tagore's theory of art. His concept of 'the surplus in man' is characterized by transcendence, while the idea of 'personality' is marked by assertion of the creative self. Borrowing Tagore's own phrase, we could say that a 'creative unity' of the two notions characterizes his philosophical thinking. In support of the contention we may provide a definitive statement : Personhood (aham) is man's most valued dimension

of his being. The fact that man is a unique centre of consciousness, irreducibly apart from everything that he is conscious of, is what constitutes man's ontological freedom in a negative manner. Creativity transforms the alienation into a harmony (Sāmanjasya) with the Universe. The transcendence, which for Tagore is the essence of the spiritual (ādhyātmika), does not nullify the uniqueness of the self, rather enriches it by a greater comprehensive awareness. Tagore calls it Visvabodha, which is at once ethical and aesthetic. In numerous passages of the Sāntiniketan series of essays Tagore has expounded the dialectics of transcendence and assertion. "The I am in me realizes its own extension, its own infinity whenever it truly realizes something else .... That fact that we exist has its truth in the fact that everything else does exist, and the "I am" in me crosses its finitude whenever it deeply realizes itself in the "Thou art". This crossing of the limit produces joy, the joy that we have in beauty, in love, in greatness"<sup>6</sup>. What is of value in a work of art is the 'realizing'. This is true of art as of life, where and when it is truly creative.

The harmony of the within and the without is creativity, and this is possible only if the self assumes or achieves a disinterested stance. How this takes place may be understood when we consider Tagore's concept of man as an 'angel of surplus'. The surplus in man can be interpreted as a distinct plane of human existence. It is free from the pressure of biological

impulses, and the propensity to apply moral categories. In contrast to such planes as the biological and the moral, which are strictly speaking planes of action, the surplus in men is primarily contemplative or visionary. At other levels of consciousness man is highly pragmatical, and governed by the principles of expediency and utility. Tagore believes that by actively modulating his relationships with the world man can advance from quantity to quality, from fact, to truth, from necessity to choice, from utility to self expression. All human creativity has its source in the surplus.

Tagore conceives of art as an encounter of the self with its other. Art is a bridge across the chasm which alienates the individual from the world around. Now if art is a process of delineation, then the intentionality of human consciousness maps onto a non-solipsistic world. The world as revealed to the aesthetic consciousness in man's true world. Tagore distinguishes between experience as such and one's own consciousness of experience. The consciousness of experience is a reflective order of awareness which may integrate the emotions that are often at variance with each other. What Kant called 'a many coloured and diverse a self'<sup>7</sup> is no self at all. Selfhood is "a self-conscious principle of transcendental unity"<sup>8</sup>. Selfhood is an achievement, a creative unity, and this is what makes man a person. The act of integrating the emotions occurs at a higher level of consciousness, one might almost say that Tagore is talking about a suspension

of the natural standpoint in order to arrive at selfhood or personality. And we may add that Tagore's notion of disinterestedness arises from the possible experience of suspending the natural standpoint with regard to our ordinary emotions.

For Tagore, emotions are the principle means of man's unification and harmonization with the world. They have a referential or semantic function. They may unite us with the world, they may also alienate us from it or from one or more of its objects. That is, there are positive as well as negative emotions. Through the positive one, Tagore tells us, the world becomes a part of our personality. If this world were taken away, he continues, our personality would lose all its content. It is notable that all emotions, positive as well as negative enjoy a similar status, because the reflective level of awareness is disinterested. It may be the case that Tagore sets a higher value on the unificatory function of the emotions than on their alienating function. Yet the point is, that the emotions, positive and negative, are just 'entertained' at the reflective level, and this could make us realize the world as more fully and richly real than normal experience.

There is a good deal in the account above that should recall rasavāda of Abhinashgupta. There is of course a difference. The case of tasting one's state of consciousness charged with delight is not denied by Tagore, but this delight is delight in

self-expression, and expression for Tagore is always communicative. A clarification of self-consciousness is simultaneous with a deepening of world-consciousness. Hence the so-called indifference to existence as one comes across in Kant's notion of disinterestedness is not much there in Tagore. 'The consciousness of the real within me seeks for its own corroboration the touch of the Real outside me. When it fails the self in me is depressed'<sup>9</sup>. This is something like insisting on outer criteria for inner processes. We may support our interpretation by referring to a remarkable passage<sup>10</sup> where Tagore raises the issue concerning the mode of existence of a work of art. He asks on what does rasa or aesthetic experience depend in order to attain its perfection. He mentions a three-fold locus of a work of art, say a poem. First, there is the body of the poem made up of the laws of prosody and words. Secondly, there is the cognitive dimension of a poem. Great literature has something in it which satisfies our thinking and awareness of the way facts stand to one another. No distortion of truth can give us a deeper and permanent satisfaction. Lastly, there is the locus of emotions or feelings (bhāva). Our encounter with departicularized feelings gives us delight. A worthy work of art satisfies our intellect our hearts and our entire human nature. Anything short of this distorts the experience by making it a matter of the surface alone. Tagore says that the aesthetic experience, just as our moral life, should be, regulatively guided by the three values<sup>11</sup> of hrī (modesty), dhī (intellection) and Srī (beautitude) corresponding to the three levels on which

work of art of permanent significance survives. The three values are of ancient coinage. Hri is mentioned in Buddhist ethics as hiri in Pali; dhi is Vedic in its association with Savitā, the principle of intellectual and spiritual illumination; while Sri connotes not only beauty but also goodness. What Tagore speaks of as the perfection of the aesthetic experience in terms of the three strata existence of a work of art has a good deal in common with Kant's notion of the satisfaction<sup>12</sup> of the powers of the mind - the cognitive faculty, the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, and the faculty of desire. It is quite clear that Tagore's demands are exacting ones, since for him the perfection of the aesthetic experience cannot remain impervious to theoretical and practical dimensions of human awareness. It is no less important to note that Tagore, even though he is a protagonist of the autonomy of art, glides into the view, which another Kantian, Friedrich Schiller had called, art for life's sake.

The import of Tagore's idea of perfection of the aesthetic experience is disinterestedness. In its absence, the aesthetic experience would degenerate into sentimentalism, a distortion of rasa. Tagore does not look upon the aesthetic experience as anything other than the spiritual, or deepening of the consciousness, and he images the artist as an ascetic<sup>13</sup>, who is not uninterested with anything around him, but disinterested, that is in harmony with his within and without. 'Harmony' is Tagore's

word for freedom. It is freedom from a habitual mode of reaction or sentimentalism. Beauty, he says, brings our instinctive urges under control, and thereby liberates us. It is, for Tagore, is revelatory in nature. Significantly enough Tagore states his definition of beauty in connection with relating his religious experience<sup>14</sup>. It is marked by an "expansion of consciousness" when the "screen of the commonplace" is lifted from the face of things, and thus their "ultimate significance" is intensely realized. To discover beauty is to receive "a direct message of spiritual reality".

As Tagore wants us to understand, disinterestedness is not impersonality, for it is the 'personal man' who is the artist, because he is capable of disinterestedness. Science is the domain where impersonality is the king. Science deals in abstractions, and emotions, 'the elements of personality' are carefully removed from its world. Facts, clarity and truth-value govern this area of human enterprise. To know about a rose, is different from what one feels about it. When a rose is touched by our emotions, it is not only itself, "but ourselves also"<sup>15</sup>. By "feeling it, we feel ourselves". It is the "taste-value"<sup>16</sup> of a rose that matters in art. Kant's point about the indifference to concepts is there in Tagore as well. He says, "We know a thing because it belongs to itself". The function of art, then, is to find out the unique in terms of human imagery, to evoke in our mind the deep sense of reality. 'Reality' in Tagore's usage is what Kant

would call 'aesthetic' i.e. related to the subject, Hence Tagore's distinction between facts and reality is significant. Facts are impersonal, while "Reality is human"<sup>17</sup>. A botanist's rose is not that through which one might express one's love. It needs to be "touched" as Tagore has put it, by one's emotions to become a reality<sup>18</sup>.

Now it is in respect of our emotional life that disinterestedness is invoked by Tagore. The role of disinterestedness in our moral life is widely spoken. We may take the Buddhist notion of upekkhā as an example. Upekkhā or equanimity is said to be a blessed disposition. In the context of Buddhism, it is never understood as a state of total insensitivity to values and persons. It is taken as connoting a balance of mind marked by a beyondness with regard to uncertainties and struggles of ordinary life. Upekkhā is a sort of analysis of the self by the self. As freedom from self-confinement, upekkhā results in clarity, translucency and universality. It overcomes all sense of separateness and in closedness, and results in the quality of interconnectedness and the ability to join with others by overcoming all sense of separateness either in time or space. Tagore's idea of good life incorporates much of the Buddhist notion of upekkhā, and it may be noted that his own interpretation<sup>19</sup> of the message of the Buddha emphasizes the positive teachings such as the notion of metta or loving-kindness.

What does disinterestedness have to do with the aesthetic attitude? For Tagore the domains of the aesthetic and the moral are not sharply distinguished, and in either case an overlooking of our natural feelings and will are required in order to achieve creative unity or harmony. Union or harmony is a value of Reality, and is the principle of creativity. An overview of our natural feelings and will is possible only, if we are capable of taking a 'distant view' of things, as Hume<sup>20</sup> called it. A 'distant' view is a disinterested view. As Tagore has suggested we touch Reality by actively or creatively modulating our relationship with the world, and thus we undergo a 'second birth'<sup>21</sup> into 'the extra-natural world'<sup>22</sup>. Tagore's point is that a disinterested state of mind alone is capable of bringing our freedom of will in harmony with the freedom of other wills, 'the rhythm of wills'. Now the case with the aesthetic attitude is different, the spiritual process undergone in our moral and aesthetic lives is the same, a self-exceeding, transitively reaching onto the other. The problem of art, as Tagore argues, is not creation of beauty, but self-expression<sup>23</sup> so as to touch other selves. Art is essentially communicative. An illumination of our feelings, an expansion of consciousness mark as well the twin domains of the spirit, that of goodness and beauty.

The overlooking of our emotions is disinterestedness, and in this imagination comes to our aid. This point may be appreciated

if we bear in our mind that there is a centrality of emotions and the imagination in Tagore's philosophical ideas. The role of imagination in Tagore's thought is as important and crucial as it is in Kant. For Kant, inspite of his reason oriented apparatus such as the understanding or the law, a priori principles, etc., imagination has remained inescapable all through his Critiques. In the first Critique, the imagination is said to be a mysterious power of nature at work with the understanding. Without it schematism cannot take place. In the second Critique the notion of the Kingdom of ends is the gift of the imagination. In the third it is the free play of the imagination and the understanding - the harmony of the two cognitive faculties is the delight we take in the beautiful. What is significant is that Kant, in the third Critique, refers to the imagination as one of the cognitive faculties, the other being the understanding.

There is a respectable tradition in Philosophy which does not shy away in according place of importance to imagination. Plato's such dialogues as the Ion, the Apology, and the Meno hint at a faculty in men which cannot be reduced to rule and measure, something that could be called inspiration, imagination or even aspiration. Even A.N. Whitehead in his Process and Reality, has spoken of 'imaginative generalization'.

Tagore looks upon the imagination as belonging to the core of human awareness. It appears to be almost identical with what

Tagore has elsewhere called the surplus in man. Its import is ontological, or, as Professor B.K. Matilal has remarked, imagination or surplus is the ontology of human hopes and values. Imagination is a projective functions of the mind, and is the source of the 'might be's and 'might have been's, 'ought's and 'should be's. It is the zone of freedom over and above the logical understanding. It should be understood that, for Tagore, the imagination is not fancy, rather it is a state of consciousness as Sartre<sup>24</sup> has argued : an imaginative consciousness is a consciousness of an object as an image and not consciousness of an image. A non-imagining consciousness the understanding, 'engulfed in the existent', while imaginative consciousness entertains the possibles. Hence Tagore reminds us that in order to understand man as a creative being, we "must realize not only the reasoning mind, but also the creative imagination"<sup>25</sup>.

We may now suggest that but for the imagination disinterestedness is possible. What Hume had called the 'distant view of things' can have its source in our passional life, but modulated by the imagination. As a principle of synthesis, as in Kant, the imagination relates the data of the senses to the possible. Whatever cannot be Schematized, be it an idea of Reason or an idea of the imagination, "has to be 'symbolically' apprehended. The symbolic, says Kant, is a form of intuiting"<sup>26</sup>. Such imaginative apperception can only be disinterested, since it is free from the exigencies of the biological, the merely practical, and the 'tyranny of facts'.

Even if we take Kant's notion of disinterestedness as indifference to concepts and existence, it follows that disinterestedness is an imaginative mode of considering possibilities. There is a conceptual link between being interested and being determined by, what Sartre has called, 'existents'. So the surplus or the imaginative mode of being is freedom. Negatively, it is freedom from habit, from taking facts for truth, from expediency and the naturalistic ways of thinking. Positively, or rather creatively speaking, freedom, in terms of imagination, is "the atmosphere of the infinite", which "emancipates our consciousness from the bond of separateness of self". The religion of Man is no less the religion of an artist.

Now Tagore's is a process anthropology. It spells out gradual unfolding of consciousness, level after level, anke anke caitānyer prakāsher pālā <sup>27</sup>. Through a disinterested imaginative mode of awareness man engages himself in an adventure of discovering his "own far-off ineffable image". So 'man' is a horizon concept just as 'the infinite' is. Art, simultaneously with religion and morality, is a matter of aspiration, an intense emotional drive towards the ideal of perfection. The spiritual unity of life and aspiration, the dialectic of the finite and the infinite, according to Tagore, is what characterizes man's civilization. There is a sense in which the concept of man is subsumed under the concept of man in the context of Tagore's philosophical ideas. In another sense, there is no philosophy of art at all in Tagore except an account of man's creative,

spiritual ontology<sup>28</sup>. Therefore what man does elsewhere is no less creative than what he does in art. And everywhere disinterestedness, for Tagore, is a necessary condition for creativity. Disinterested is "freedom of consciousness".

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Kāvyaaprakāsa, ed. S.P. Bhattacharya, Calcutta, 1959, p. 9.
2. Op. cit., p. 330.
3. A fairly precise equivalent for rasa is 'aesthetic experience', see R. Gnoli, The Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta, Rome, 1956.
4. Warder, A.K., The Science of Criticism in India, The Adyar Library and Research Centre, Madras, 1978.
5. Raghavan, V., Bhoja's Srīṅgaraprakāsa, Madras, 1963.
6. Tagore, R., On Art & Aesthetics, ed. P. Neogy, Orient Longmans, New Delhi, 1961, p. 47.
7. CPR, B 134
8. Tagore R., The Religion of Man, Unwin Books, London, 1970, p. 75. (henceforth RM).
9. Ibid., p. 82.
10. These values are incorporated in the Candī. Hri occurs as vījāmantra, and mentioned as lajjā, dhī as buddhi, and Srī has an equivalent in Kānti.
11. First Introduction, XI.
12. RM, Chapter VI, p. 58.
13. Tagore, R., Personality, Macmillan, London, 1965, p. 16. (henceforth P).
14. Ibid., p. 20.
15. RM, p. 84.

16. P, p. 16.
17. A Treatise of Human Nature, Oxford, BK III, p. 583.
18. P, p. 81.
19. Ibid., p. 19.
20. RM, p. 15.
21. CJ, Section 59.
22. Punascha, No. 5.
23. It may sound startling, but in nonetheless true.