

## CHAPTER XI

### The Concept of Disinterestedness In Recent Indian Thought II

In the present and the following Chapters we shall continue our inquiry into the concept of disinterestedness in recent Indian thought. We shall consider two thinkers, Sri Aurobindo and Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya. In this chapter we take up Sri Aurobindo.

#### Sri Aurobindo

Sri Aurobindo is a personality of diverse dimensions, a propounder of an original integral metaphysics, an innovator of a new genre of poetry, a literary critic of unexcelled insights, and as is well known, a yogi. But Sri Aurobindo, inspite of everything, always considered himself as a poet. Commenting on Sri Aurobindo's political career, Tilak had said that his was "the politics of yoga". We may adapt Tilak's adage, and say that Sri Aurobindo's aesthetics is the aesthetics of yoga.

Yoga, for Sri Aurobindo, is ascension of consciousness to higher and more integral levels. In the evolutionary adventure of consciousness, to be more evolved is to be more consciousness. Sri Aurobindo's has been a metaphysics of consciousness in ascent. And he places art on the ontological ladder.

Sri Aurobindo's contribution to philosophy of art consists in the following directions : (a) an interpretation of Aristotle's notion of Katharsis in terms of the concept of Cittasuddhi; (b) reinstating the Vedic concept of the poet as a seer; (c) formulating the concept of the poet as a seer; (d) formulating the concept of poetry as mantra; and finally, indicating that the high office of art consists in purifying the natural emotions by beauty. We shall begin by considering Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the notion of Katharsis as Cittasuddhi.

The notion of Katharsis occurs in Aristotle's definition of tragedy in the Poetics<sup>1</sup>. The first point to note is that with the notion of Katharsis Aristotle could be taken as throwing out an answer to Plato's argument that poetry inflames the passions<sup>2</sup>. In the Politics<sup>3</sup>, Aristotle has dealt more elaborately on Katharsis in connection with the benefit of music in working off emotional frenzy. Katharsis has been variously interpreted, as a Hippocratic metaphor, as a religious, and even a moral metaphor. The metaphor, whatever interpretation one may be inclined to endorse, always suggests the purgation or expulsion of something harmful. In the context of art-experience it implies the purification or aesthetic depersonalization of our usually selfish emotions. Katharsis, as Butcher<sup>4</sup> has suggested, has something to do with the dignity of tragic experience and its enlargement of our souls.

Now the notion of chittasuddhi belongs to the vocabulary of yogic discipline, and Sri Aurobindo, in discussing the uses of art<sup>5</sup>, focusses on the purificatory power of art-experience and assimilates Katharsis to chittasuddhi. According to Sri Aurobindo, Citta is the mind-stuff, it is the locus of "the primitive animal emotions". Further, citta is mapped higher than prāna, and above it there is manas or mind. Beyond the manas is the buddhi, or thought proper, which when perfected, is independent of the desires, the claims of the body and the interference of the emotions. Above the buddhi is spirituality, of which all the others are "coverings and veils"<sup>6</sup>.

The mapping in terms of yogic psychology is important in the context of Sri Aurobindo's thinking is important, since man has to undergo the evolutionary process from citta to spirituality. There are three uses of art, the aesthetic, the intellectual, and the spiritual. The aesthetic use of art lies in cittasuddhi. Sri Aurobindo writes, "Aristotle assigns a high value to tragedy because of its purifying force. He describes its effect as Katharsis, a sacramental word of the Greek mysteries, which, in the secret discipline of the ancient Greek Tāntriks, answered precisely to our cittasuddhi, the purification of the citta or mass of established ideas, feelings and actional habits in a man"<sup>7</sup>. He continues, "Aristotle was speaking of the purification of feelings, passions and emotions in the heart through imaginative treatment in poetry..."<sup>8</sup> This is, says Sri Aurobindo, what

constitutes the justification of the aesthetic side of art. "It purifies by beauty", and "beauty is the appointed road by which mankind as a race must climb to God"<sup>9</sup>. The problem then is : how to reach to vidyā through avidyā ? How to attain to bliss unalloyed by self-regarding emotions? The answer is cittasuddhi.

We may then suggest that disinterestedness is the result of cittasuddhi, a state of the self. Sometimes Sri Aurobindo uses the term 'impersonal' for 'disinterested' as in The Future Poetry. The notion of impersonality is explained by Sri Aurobindo in terms of the categories of essence and accident. The essence of beauty is timeless, whereas the personal is the "time element". The time element is the accidental, and it "limits and deflects our judgment"<sup>10</sup>. We may note that in saying this Sri Aurobindo rings almost Kantian. He continues, "a crowd of accidental influences belonging to the effect of time and the mental environment upon our mentality exercise an exaggerated domination and distort or colour the view of our mental eye upon its object"<sup>11</sup>. What we should notice is that a concept of "pure" aesthetic judgment is being implied by Sri Aurobindo. To get at "the eternal true substance" of art is to have our aesthetic response pure, direct and heightened, beyond the accidents brought in by the time element or the personal. The impersonal, for Sri Aurobindo, is the locus of creativity as well as appreciation. Aesthetic communication is possible only if the personal or the ego is transmuted and chastened into the state of impersonality.

We find in this account a metaphysical spelling out of the traditional notion of Sahrdaya "the impersonal enjoyer of creative beauty in us responding to the impersonal creator and interpreter of beauty in the poet"<sup>12</sup>.

Citta or the heart, says Sri Aurobindo, may either be directed downwards, i.e. to the satisfaction of the senses and the vital desires, or upwards through intellect to the Spirit. In disinterestedness or when the citta is purified, "the heart works for itself"<sup>13</sup>. The heart, working for itself enjoys "the poetry of life", that is the delight of emotions. And art is a powerful agent toward that end. In point of fact Sri Aurobindo is pointing to a truth not only about art, but also of life. Shelley in his "Defence of Poetry" has remarked that, Greek tragedy teaches self-knowledge. Schopenhauer called it "enfranchisement from the passions"<sup>14</sup>. Hegel considers the theory that art experience mitigates the passions. The brutality of passion consists in its selfishness and engrossingness, in the identification of the self with a narrowly limited interest. Art makes man aware of himself, and by putting him into a spiritual instead of a brutal relation with his feelings it delivers him from their tyranny.

What is significant in Sri Aurobindo's treatment of disinterestedness is that it is not the terminal point of aesthetic enterprise, rather it is only an opening to the Spirit. The Spirit is an ontological term in Sri Aurobindo's scheme of thought.

It is at once the nisus and the destiny of human development. "The spirit is that in which all the rest of the human being reposes, towards which it returns and the final self-revelation of which is the goal of humanity"<sup>15</sup>. With these words Sri Aurobindo is looking back to the Kena and the Taittiriya texts on rasa and ānanda. It may be recalled that the twin chapters on 'delight of existence' in The Life Divine are but metaphysical amplification of the Upanisadic insights.

Disinterestedness, for Sri Aurobindo, is freedom. It is freedom in the sense of being the master of one's responses to the world's contacts. Pleasure, pain and indifference are 'obligations of habit', they are not the true values of experience. But it is possible to take delight 'impartially' in all experiences. Our ordinary responses are reversible, since the more we refuse to be dominated by our nerves and body, the more we draw back from implication of himself in our physical and vital parts, the greater is our freedom. This is elimination of the accident and seizing the essence or rasa. And how that is possible is described by Sri Aurobindo in the following terms : "If we could be entirely disinterested in mind and heart and impose that detachment on the nervous being... the true essential taste of the inalienable delight of existence in all its variations would be within our reach. We attain to something of this capacity for variable but universal delight in the aesthetic reception of things as represented by Art and Poetry, so that we enjoy there the Rasa or taste of the sorrowful, the terrible, even the

horrible..., and the reason is because we are detached, disinterested, not thinking of ourselves... but only of the thing and its essence"<sup>16</sup>.

But the delight disinterestedness makes possible for us to experience is larger than the merely aesthetic, it is in Sri Aurobindo's term, "supraaesthetic". So Sri Aurobindo prepares us for another aesthetics, the aesthetics of "objectless delight"<sup>17</sup>.

According to Sri Aurobindo, all creation is self-manifestation, "the poet, artist or musician when he creates does really nothing but develop some potentiality in his unmanifested self into a form of manifestation"<sup>18</sup>. Now this logic of creativity is an imprecise image of "The delight of coming into manifestation"<sup>19</sup> at the heart of, what he calls, "the original Existence". So it is "the delight of being". Now since consciousness is the very nature of the original Existence, the delight of being is "the delight of the rhythm of consciousness"<sup>20</sup>. These are fertile metaphysical notions, and axiomatic to Sri Aurobindo's thinking. The conceptual links obtaining between consciousness and delight on the one hand, and disinterestedness on the other are important for appreciating Sri Aurobindo's account of the creative psyche. It is to that story we may now turn.

Sri Aurobindo brings his concept of mind to bear upon the issue. "The intellect is not the poet, the artist, the creator within us; creation comes by a suprarational influx of light and

power which must work always by vision and inspiration"<sup>21</sup>. Sri Aurobindo's argument is that mind is not purely a logical power, its operations are impaired by sub-rational forces like desires, passions, associations, prejudices and prejudgments. These are egoistic, and determined externally by objects. Wherever delight mind might take in its objects would be interested, i.e., not indifferent to existence, as Kant had suggested. Further logical mind can only construct, it can not create. Hence a supramental orientation of mind will not only purify it, but will also increase its power and dimension. And this is what the aesthetic consciousness seeks to do. The point then is that Sri Aurobindo's concept of mind takes a good account of the projective mental power called the imagination. This fact sets him apart from the tradition led by Hobbes, and recently given currency by Kyle. The creative process is complex enough, and it does not consist in problem solving or reshuffling of discrete elements of atomic contents and experienced forms into other combinations. In "Abt Vogler", Browning says that "out of three sounds" the musician frames "not a fourth sound, but a star". This is creativity, but is it possible? "Thought", says Sri Aurobindo, "is composed of two separate sides, judgment or reason and imagination, both of which are necessary to perfect ideation"<sup>22</sup>. Aesthetic consciousness breaks through the mechanical operations of the mind by taking hold of mental operations. Without it the self-perfection of the mental being that man is, would remain incomplete.

The mind, says Sri Aurobindo, stands between a super-conscience and an inconscience and receives from both these opposit powers. Owing to its intermediate status on the ontological ladder the mind can only deal with actualities, and the imagination is the mind's way of summoning possibilities. The imagination figures "the 'may be's and 'might be's of the Infinite"<sup>23</sup>. It is not radically illusory, "as the mind ascends towards the truth-consciousness, this mental power becomes a truth imagination"<sup>24</sup>.

Now given the office of the imagination as Sri Aurobindo has suggested, it only remains to be said that creativity is an affair of freedom, not only from desires and passions, habitual reactions and prejudices but also from mechanical mental operations and constructions (vikalpas), illumined by intimation of 'the rhythm of consciousness' on delight of being. The true of eternity has its roots in heaven above and its branches reach down to earth, says the Katha Upanisad. Apropos of the masterly image we can say that, for Sri Aurobindo, the roots of art are above. A search for such roots marks Sri Aurobindo's aesthetics off from others.

Sri Aurobindo has written insightfully on the plastic arts of India in The Foundations of Indian Culture. "A seeing in the self", he says, is the method of art in India. He appears to be in line with the view that vyāngya is the intention of art.

Sri Aurobindo's notion of vyāngya is "most subtly and variably the shades and turns and teeming significances of the inner self in its manifestation"<sup>25</sup>. Contrasting the Greek and the Indian sculpture he remarks that the Indian artist stresses something behind, something more remote to the surface imagination, but nearer to the soul, and subordinates to it the physical form. A spiritual higher intuitive vision is what Sri Aurobindo demands from art. This line of thinking reaches its height in The Future Poetry.

Of all the arts Sri Aurobindo attaches most importance to poetry. Reasons may not be far to seek, since consciousness is the watch-word of Sri Aurobindo's thought, words or speech lie in a direct relation to it. Language is the house of being, said Heidegger. What Sri Aurobindo has achieved in the Hymns to the Mystic Fire, and what he says in The Future Poetry may entitle us to remark that Sri Aurobindo's is the Vedic view of art. He characterizes his notion of art as intuitive and interpretative. In course of explicating the intuitive-interpretative notion of art Sri Aurobindo has developed a version of dhvani based on disinterestedness in the sense of freedom from our infrarational propensities, and an ascent towards suprarational dimensions of being.

For Sri Aurobindo, the epistemology of art is intuitive. And more importantly intuition is a category of 'Vedantic

knowledge'. It is described figuratively as a "door in us that swings open upon the splendour of a truth beyond"<sup>26</sup>. Intuition is the messenger from the super-conscious. In the chapter titled "The Ascent Towards Supermind" in The Life Divine, Sri Aurobindo mentions the fourfold potencies of intuition : revelation, inspiration, immediate seizing of significance, and correspondence to truth. It is also pointed out that intuition functions by transforming the mind, the heart, life and the sense, And it is by the transformation that they are integrated. We may now say that, for Sri Aurobindo, some kind of intuitive seeing is always at the back of the imaginative vision of the artist or the poet. If 'intuition' is a direct spiritual perception, then it is obvious that intuitive seeing is the method of art, and art has to be a creative interpretation of the truths of existence. Such an interpretation, Sri Aurobindo says, gives us beauty, then a deeper reality of things, and finally, opens new realms of being. If art is creative interpretation of the truths of existence, then it would consist in looking beyond the surface and the moment, in changing the life values into soul values<sup>27</sup>. This he calls, "essential aesthesis", the soul's pleasure in the pure and perfect sources of feeling. Sri Aurobindo incorporates much of dhvanivāda, but it should be noted that he extends theory further till it is reposed on the road to ontology.

What is notice worthy in Sri Aurobindo's account of art and its method and the creative process is that he unflinchingly

draws attention to transmutation, purification or Katharsis whenever he talks about art and its significance for man. We have noted earlier that there are Sri Aurobindo's equivalents for disinterestedness. Rasa, according to him, is the essence of spiritual emotion, and it can be tasted only if the spirit is disinterested, i.e. by transcending the vital and the sensational. To be disinterested, for Sri Aurobindo is to be in such a state of being as to be able to see "another face of things and reveal quite another side of experience"<sup>28</sup>.

It is also remarkable that the notion of disinterestedness, in Sri Aurobindo, is wider enough than the aesthetic, understood in the ordinary sense of the term. It is brought in by way of his exploration of the concept of human personality.

Aurobindo often draws our attention to the subliminal<sup>29</sup> nature of the aesthetic inspiration. The subliminal soul in man, he says, is open to the universal delight. Man's surface existence, in his view, is a system of responses of which man is not the master. It is nervous and sensational, enslaved to habit, egoistic, and marked by an inability to seize the essence. To look for the essence of a thing, i.e., rasa, in its contact with oneself is the mark of delight, says Sri Aurobindo. But when, instead of seeking the essence of a thing, one looks to one's nervous responses like pain or pleasure or indifference, rasa, is apprehended in its dwarfed or perverted form.

In order to appreciate Sri Aurobindo's notions of delight and disinterestedness in terms of his 'essential aesthetic' it should be borne in mind that he mentions two orders of delight, 'delight of being' and 'delight of becoming'. The delight of existence or being is objectless delight. And it is in and through the delight of becoming that the delight of being enjoys a formative modality. The delight of being is totally reflexive<sup>30</sup>, while the delight of becoming is transitive. The latter always has, for itself, an object, which is in a way the cause of a delight experience. The notion of 'objectless delight' is a paradigm of disinterestedness or impersonality. This comes close to Kant's idea of our delight in the beautiful, which is independent with regard to the existence of an object, it is said to be 'pure' or 'free', since neither reason nor sensation forces our assent.

The disinterestedness of aesthetic delight, explains Sri Aurobindo, is a case of the subsumption of the delight of becoming under that of being. When the usual objects of delight are transformed into "reflectors"<sup>31</sup>, one enters the state of experiencing 'objectless' delight, for which the other name is 'impersonality' or 'disinterestedness'. It is solely on the basis of a metaphysics of the self that disinterestedness of the aesthetic attitude can be established. The self alone can grasp or taste the essence of things. The Atharva Veda describes the self that delights in the essence of things as follows:

akāmo dhīro amṛta svayambha rasana trptah<sup>32</sup>.

Accordingly it follows, for Sri Aurobindo, that disinterestedness in respect of one's knowing, feeling and nervous responses are the necessary conditions for seizing the essence of things. The chief value of poetry, or for that matter, of all the finer arts<sup>33</sup>, lies in the fact that they constitute an aesthetic device for developing the capacity for variable but universal delight in the reception of things. In art and poetry, through an imposed or even consciously cultivated detachment from egoistic sensation and universal attitude, it becomes possible for one part of our self-divided nature to seize the essence of things. One could say that the part of our self that delights in or seizes the essence of things is deathless, just as vyānjana is the superior dimension of meaning of poetic discourse.

The point that emerges is that aesthetic apprehension ushers in a change in consciousness. This thesis is parasitic upon Sri Aurobindo's concept of mind or his critique of mental operations. As he says, human mind reaches beyond itself, since mind is 'a power of Ignorance seeking for Truth'. In order that it may fulfil itself, the human mind, by its acts of self-exceeding, links itself with higher grades of consciousness.

There are two marks of going beyond the given range or scale of mind, impersonality and universality, to exceed the personal ego, and non-limitation by the habitual limiting point

of view. These two mark off aesthetic experience just as they do any spiritual one. Spirituality of an experience consists in the fact that in and through it one discovers one's own self. The self as the absolute conscious existence is free, i.e., self-possession and delight are its essential properties. Sri Aurobindo links creativity in the arts to the creative nature of the self. Delight and freedom are said to be the two attributes of self-expression. The argument then is that delight of existence is, and ought to be, our real response in all situations. This is the demand of the new aesthetics proposed by Sri Aurobindo. If it be possible to discover the real nature of self as the self-delight of being, then the habitual mode of our living could be altered. With the widening of consciousness there would occur an expansion of aesthetic values. Since art and poetry go a long way towards discovering man's authentic self, aesthetic culture is a part, a very important part indeed, of spiritual experience. Art is man's lien on the Absolute.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Poetics, Chapter VI.
2. Republic, Book X.
3. Politics, V [VIII], 7.
4. Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Arts, p. 22.
5. The National Value of Art (hereafter NVA), p. 7.
6. NVA, p. 4.
7. NVA, p. 7.
8. NVA, p. 15.
9. NVA, p. 8.
10. The Future Poetry (hereafter FP), p. 38.
11. FP, p. 38.
12. FP, p. 37.
13. NVA, p. 13.
14. The World as Will and Idea, III.
15. NVA, p. 19.
16. The Life Divine (hereafter LD), p. 101.
17. LD, p. 93.
18. LD, p. 105.
19. LD, p. 106.
20. LD, p. 106.
21. The Human Cycle, p. 159.
22. NVA, p. 5.
23. LD, p. 391.
24. LD, p. 392.

25. The Foundations of Indian Culture, (hereafter FIC), p. 255.
26. LD, p. 64.
27. FP, p. 233.
28. FP, p. 205.
29. Sri Aurobindo uses the term 'subliminal' in the sense of a consciousness larger than what he called the surface existence. It is not what Freud has called the unconscious.
30. LD, pp. 86-87 "all absoluteness is pure delight .... our original being is ... a self-possession whose other name is self-delight..."
31. LD, p. 93.
32. Atharva Veda, X.4.44.
33. According to Sri Aurobindo, the essential office of the arts is cittasuddhi, but not all the arts do it in the same, or in the same measure. He distinguishes sculpture painting, music and literature in NVA, IV and FIC Chapters on the arts.