

Ranjan K. Ghosh: *Great Indian Thinkers on Art: Creativity, Aesthetic Communication, and Freedom*. Black and White (An Imprint of Sundeep Prakashan), Delhi, pp. viii+105, Rs. 295/-.

The book under review carries a fundamental message that art is a unique endeavour of mankind, which provides in this mundane life an experience that is akin to experiencing Divinity. Art is viewed from the Indian perspective as a source of an order of experience that transcends all our experience that we have in our mundane life, and this experience is acknowledged as proximate to *Bramhanubhuti*. Being an erudite philosopher and a pictorial artist of high calibre, Ranjan K. Ghosh (henceforth RKG) has repeatedly tried to bring home this point in this book, while interpreting the views of Coomaraswamy, Hiriyana, Sri Aurobinda, K. C. Bhattacharyya and Rabindranath by means of perceptive and insightful analysis. His own involvement in the artistic creation provides him an authentic and rightful platform to make us understand the nature of art and its significance for life. In order to make clear the Indian perspective on art in this book, he also compares and contrasts time and again the western viewpoints as his scholarship on the western aesthetics is evident from his earlier published seminal works.

In the introductory chapter, the author distinguishes the nature of emotion that one experiences in his encounter with a work of art from emotions that are experienced in the real life by invoking the story of Valmiki who feels extreme grief and sorrow at the sight of the tragic death of one of the *kraunch* birds by fowler's arrow, and then he starts giving expression of his personal emotion into the form of a poetic art that finally takes the shape of the *Ramayana*. For any author of Indian aesthetics, making the distinction between these two kinds of emotion is both a crucial as well as a challenging task. It is crucial, because on this distinction depends his claim for the unique status of aesthetic enjoyment, and it is challenging, because the charge of psychologism hangs over his subsequent claims like proverbial Democles' sword. So RKG dwells rightly at the beginning on making this distinction from Indian perspective and brings out its subtle nuances by means of insightful analysis. Further, he clearly shows as to how the classical Indian aestheticians like Avinavagupta, Anandavardhana and others keep emotion or feeling-content at the centre of aesthetic experience unlike those of their western colleagues. He even goes so far as for Indian thinkers to maintain that 'Emotion is the essence of art' (p.10). Like the western tradition, art is *not* considered to be a mere imitation of life or nature in the Indian tradition. What is created in art by imagination is something that is idealized. This idealized state is identified as the state of aesthetic enjoyment which is full of pure joy and is acknowledged as proximate to the apex state of Ultimate Reality. The author also shows as to how this view of art is in keeping with the Indian conception of life and world.

In Chapter II entitled 'The Aesthetic Divide', RKG argues that Indian thinker views art as *discontinuous* with life, and the dividing line between art and life is drawn by him at the level of *experience*. He points out that though the western thinker considers art as a break from life but he makes this distinction at the level of *objects*. That is, he looks for some objective properties in a work of art, which would make it so as distinguished from the object of utility. Noting in brief the inadequacy of the western approach, the author argues that an Indian thinker puts emphasis on the *experiential* aspect of a work of art to provide it a privileged status. That is, an object can be claimed to be a work of art only if it is capable of evoking a special sort of emotion as distinguished from our psychological states of mind. It is this sublime emotion that is created by the artist in a work of art and enjoyed by the qualified reader or spectator, which does not continue with our empirical life. And here lies the dividing line between art and life for an Indian thinker.

But exceptionally Bharata, a classical Indian aesthetician, puts emphasis on the *object* of experience (*asvadya*), according to Professor S. S. Barlingay's interpretation of Bharata's theory of *rasa*. According to Barlingay, Bharata understands by *rasa* that

which is the object of experience (*asvadya*) and not relish or its experience (*asvada*), the latter being the view of Abhinavagupta. On Barlingay's interpretation, *rasa* is objectified, according to Bharata, on the stage, and this holds true exclusively to dramatic arts. Thus the term *rasa* is used only in the context of dramatic production, and not applicable to other sorts of arts, such as poetry, painting, sculpture, etc. Bharata uses the term *rasa* to mean the enactment of emotion on the stage rather than to refer to the impingement of such creation upon spectator's experiential consciousness. What is created on the stage has an objective existence by being de-linked from the dramatist, as also by being independent of the spectator. Thus the *rasa* is medium-specific, for it is the medium of a work of art that provides it the distinctive aesthetic dimension. RKG endorses this view of Bharata as interpreted by Barlingay but not without pointing out the difficulties of Abhinavagupta's view on art as mere experience (*asvada*).

Chapter III deals with Ananda Coomaraswamy's view on art. What is essentially argued in the chapter is that Coomaraswamy considers art as a spiritual undertaking. Setting aside the western idea of 'art for art's sake', an Indian artist seeks to discover the Divinity in a work of art, and this is made possible by means of his memory images, strength of his visualization and his imagination rather than by mere imitating Nature. The Indian perspective puts emphasis on the *mental* intervention of an artist to create a work of art. The mental vision of 'Form' or 'Idea' is represented in a work of art in terms of line and colour. The 'Form' or 'Idea' that is visualized by an artist finds expression in a work of art, and this 'Form' or 'Idea' is nothing but *unmanifest* ideal reality that lies behind the empirical world. An Indian artist is always in quest for the Ultimate Reality that subsists behind the seeming empirical reality. Thus the work of art is considered in the Indian context as an expression of Divinity, and the viewer is called upon to share and relish the experience of Divinity underlying the world of multiplicity with an equally powerful intuitive vision and contemplative mood. The discovery of the ultimate truth in a work provides pure joy or *Ananda* to the spectator, and thereby the spiritual end of Indian art is fulfilled.

As its title 'Art-life Interface' indicates, Chapter IV centres on the issue that art is an integral part of human life, and that is insightfully discussed from Aurobinda's perspective. For Sri Aurobinda, human life or consciousness is not something that is static and fixed but always changing in terms of growth and development. Thus the evolution of human consciousness takes place. In this process of human evolution, the sense and experience of beauty accompany the different levels and stages of human life and play a crucial role in shaping up his outward personality as well as making him look at his own innermost being. As RKG has rightly pointed out, Sri Aurobinda's focus of attention is directed towards the question: 'what is the function or use of art in human life?' rather than towards the question: 'What is art?' the latter being the question often asked by the western thinker. At the primordial level of human consciousness, art regulates the instinctive bodily behaviour and wild passions, and develops a sense of beauty in him, and this is evident in the entire spectrum of our individual and social life. But he must soon transcend this level of consciousness and elevate himself to the next higher stage. At this stage, art purifies man's unruly emotions and facilitates him to achieve moral development and intellectual growth. But man is destined to move even beyond the stage of moral and intellectual development to become pure spiritual Self. After insightful analysis of these ideas of Sri Aurobinda, RKG argues as to how Sri

Aurobinda falls in line with the traditional Indian thinking on art and aesthetics as a means of reaching out to the Ultimate Reality. But this ultimate goal of human life must be preceded by the earlier stages of developing aesthetic sensibility and the shaping out of our moral and intellectual development. Among other insightful ideas, one point that has been brought out by the author very clearly is that the same work of art would receive multiple responses in accordance with various levels of consciousness of the people in a particular society.

In the penultimate chapter of the book, RKG begins by pointing out that though K. C. Bhattacharyya agrees with other Indian thinkers as to the nature of aesthetic experience as contemplative and impersonal, but his approach is quite distinct from other Indian thinkers in that his view is devoid of any metaphysical underpinnings, and hence spiritual end has *not* been taken by him as the ideal of Indian art. Delineating in brief K. C. Bhattacharyya's distinction between three levels of feeling, that is, the primary, sympathetic, and contemplative, RKG lays stress on Bhattacharyya's crucial distinction between 'abstractive or contemplative' and the 'creative' approach to art in order to bring out the distinctive feature of Indian thinking on art. The author shows the difficulty of taking what is called 'objective or creative' attitude to art in which the spectator projects himself in the object, and convincingly argues in favour of Bhattacharyya's concept of 'abstractive or contemplative' approach in which the viewer 'seeks freedom by dissolving the object in his own self...' (p. 75). And then RKG argues as to how, like other Indian thinkers, the experiential dimension gets preference over the objective aspect of art in K. C. Bhattacharyya's theory of art.

While examining Tagore's view on art and creativity in the concluding chapter, RKG points out at the outset that Tagore's focal point of attention is directed towards the nature of the process that makes possible the creation of a work of art rather than defining it. For Tagore, art is the self-expression of one's personality, which is prompted by some 'impulse' that is located in the realm of the 'superfluous' of the personality as against the need-based world. Tagore's initiation into pictorial art was not the result of formal technical training. His creative venture rather starts in making erasures or cuttings in his manuscripts, which usually take the shape of certain visual forms. And through this process, he came to realize that the 'rhythmic unity' of lines and forms is the essence of all artistic activity. The author argues for Tagore that an artist does not proceed to create a work of art with some pre-thought ideas but rather he is driven by what Tagore calls 'tide of creation'. The latter is an inner spontaneous force of the artist's personality that guides him through the creative process. But ultimately what comes through as a final product remains unknown to him until the creative process is finished. One cannot predict what the final product would be like. Much later artist 'discovers' it as a work of art.

This view of Tagore on art and creativity has been connected by RKG to poet's general philosophical outlook on life and beyond, which is based on *Upanishodic* philosophy. The *Upanishods* regard this empirical world as the manifestation of the Infinite Spirit including ourselves as individuals, and this identification takes us beyond the realm of finitude and enables us to experience infinite spiritual bliss or *Ananda*. An artist is also capable of getting the taste of this freedom and infinite bliss through his own creation. A point that has been touched but not elaborated upon by the author is that Tagore is greatly influenced by the Vaisnavite interpretation of Upanishodic thought, which holds that the highest goal of human life is the everlasting enjoyment of the

supreme blissful love for highest reality and not the attainment of liberation as it has been considered to be the highest goal of human life by most of the Indian Schools of philosophy.

It is interesting to note that in dealing with various Indian thinkers on art, RKG chooses a theme for each chapter that makes for Indian conception of art as a whole. One of the outstanding qualities of the book is that the author has brought out some significant insights of Indian aesthetics in the later part of each chapter, which engages the reader immediately in a reflective process – the latter being the hallmark of any philosophical writing. The reader placed in the contemporary Indian philosophy and art would, no doubt, find the book intellectually absorbing and stimulating. Needless to mention, the difficult themes of contemporary Indian aesthetics are analyzed in the book in a lucid and elegant style of language that has a natural flow. All these qualities make the book highly engaging and readable.

BENULAL DHAR

