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THEORY OF ART AND BENGAL ART: SOME OBSERVATIONS AND SOME QUESTIONS*

Syed Ejaz Hussain

I would like to begin with a brief and beautiful definition of art given by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. What is art? Tagore says, 'Art is the response of man's creative soul to the call of the real'.¹ Man is born free. By virtue of this freedom every man is, by nature, an artist because every man has the ability to conceive of things and imagine other possibilities. The power of imagining other possibilities when expressed in architecture, sculpture, painting, and various other forms of articulation representing a specific mores and culture, becomes art. Art is simply an object for distillation of truth and philosophical analysis. Philosophy and art have always walked hand in gloves. Philosophy aims at leading people to the practical path of attaining life's fulfillment which consists of 'freedom of truth'. Like philosophy, art has the same object before it-viz., the attainment of reality through freedom of mind. That's why Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore has said: To give us the taste of reality through 'freedom of mind is the nature of all arts'.²

But the tragedy with philosophy is that it is universally neither valid nor accepted because it lacks absolute objectivity. Absolute objectivity is the domain of art. If art is without objectivity, it ceases to be what it is and becomes philosophy; if objectivity is given to philosophy, it transforms into art. Philosophy, even if reaches the highest level, it generally represents *a fragment of man*. Art, on the other hand, represents *the whole man*, and when it represents the *whole man* it overshadows philosophy and becomes superior to philosophy. This is reflected in the Hegelian-Schiller discourse objectivity of art and beauty analyzed and explained by Bernard Bosanquet in his work *A History of Aesthetic*.³ It may be noted that Hegel and Schiller both were contemporary German philosophers and friends. Both wrote on aesthetics; though the former had some difference with the latter on the theory of art.

Is Art the Confluence of Creativity and Spirituality?

Creativity and spirituality are two fundamental dimensions of art. Creativity is a powerful shaping force which moves us beyond ourselves and exhorts us to create and cultivate that did not exist before. Spirituality, on the other hand, is a search for meaning in life. This search acts as a motivational force which, in a way, provides an orientation to life and gives a sense of direction to life. In short, creativity stands for shaping force while spirituality stands for motivational force. Art may not have meaning and depth without motivational force.

Creation of a painting, sculpture or a new image denotes the outward expression of deep and real human experiences and authentic selves. The outward expression of human experiences could be of lived life and sometimes of unlived life too. Human intellect attempts to reach the deeper

and fuller meaning of this experience. Jalaludding Rumi (1207-73), the 13th century great mystic poet of Persia, called it an intellect that is complete and preserved within one's self that moves from inside to outside as against the acquired knowledge that moves from outside to inside. Rumi says in a Persian couplet:

*Baz 'aql az rooh makhfi tar buwad
hiss ba-su-i rooh zad tar rah burad*⁴

(Intellect is more preserved and hidden than soul
Sensibility returns to soul promptly)

This hidden and preserved intellect or '*aql-i makhfi*' originates from within self and when it commences imagining, it is here, when it moves to spirituality. At this juncture, spirituality and creativity meet and converge with intellect.

But this convergence becomes possible when man comes to contemplate the things existing around him. It is the nature of every art to conceal as much it reveals. That is known as theory of ambiguity. It reveals beauty of life and at the same time it conceals complexity and ambiguity of life. Art does not provide linear explanations. An observer of art gets insight into the life and emotions it surrounds, and the meaning hidden in it through the process of revealing and concealing.⁵

Hegel on Philosophy of Art:

George Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831), the early 19th century German philosopher who had a profound influence on the course of western philosophy, culture and history was also an art lover. Hegel attempted to develop a complete philosophy of art. And in this task he surpassed his predecessors. He claimed that:

- 1) Art expresses the spirit of particular cultures. At the same time, art expresses the spirit of individual artists. By this way of expression, art portrays the general human spirit also.
- 2) History, Hegel believed, moves forward and reaches a climax. In the same way, there is progress in art also. Hegel said, '...art will always rise higher and come to perfection.'⁶

Art reveals truth in a direct and intuitive way. Hegel was inclined to think that artistic expression and artistic consciousness were a kind of climax of the history of the human spirit. In view of this he has divided art into three stages, viz. symbolic art, classical art and romantic art. In the first stage, i.e. the symbolic art, a powerful idea is expressed in a variety of forms. But this powerful idea is neither mature nor adequate to its expression. Animal-headed gods and monstrous demons and heroes of ancient Egyptian and Indian art have been given as examples of this symbolic art. In this stage, the form of art is distorted in the attempt to accommodate the transcendent power of the idea. In the second stage that is the classical art, the sense of distortion disappears. Here, the human form embodies the idea in a perfect way. But the chief lacuna in this stage is that perfection is evident but

the depth of the idea expressed is limited; for instance, the classical Greek sculpture. Romantic art is the final stage in the scheme of Hegel. During this stage art progresses to a point where the idea is stressed in an inward way and maturity of the idea is reflected in every form and content. For instance, the Christian art that focuses on crucifixion, martyrdoms and sufferings.

But what has perplexed and puzzled the historians and art historian specially is Hegel's claim that art comes to an end. In fact, Hegel's thesis of 'end of art' is similar to his thesis of the 'end of history'. He maintains that when spirit of expression reaches its full self-realization, the need for images and symbols withers away. And with this the need of art for physical means of expression comes to an end. But 'end of art' thesis does not mean that art would stop altogether; rather it meant that the need for it, and its role in the development of spirit would be fulfilled. [We would return to this Hegelian philosophy in context of Bengal art, now we should have another question].

What is Bengal Art?

Art is always free. It is as free as human soul. Freedom and liberty is the essence of every art. Tagore said, 'The human soul is proud of its comprehensive sensitivities; it claims its freedom of entry everywhere when it is fully alive and awake.'⁷ But even while a man is sleeping his soul is free. Man is sleeping on his bed but his soul takes him to strange, known and also unknown valleys about which he knows nothing. In his dream a man travels, thinks, sees, tastes, imagines, acts, reacts, forgets, recalls, weeps, laughs, draws and redraws. But after awakening from dream man is again free. While awake he can now realize and translate what he imagines and what he sees and experiences even in a dream. Freedom is thus the only pre-condition for an artist. Art is not like a vegetable or a fruit. A vegetable or fruit is produced in a particular climatic condition. Rigidity of specific climatic condition becomes a pre-condition for the production of certain kind and variety of vegetable or fruit. Like saffron cannot be grown in Dhaka and *malmal* like cotton cannot be produced in Ladakh. But the development of particular characteristics in art is not guided by any pre-condition.

An artist works only when his mind is free and enjoys liberty in complete and comprehensive way. Could art adhere to a tradition? Art, in Tagore's opinion, cannot adhere to any tradition strictly. Tagore says that all arts are 'the response of man's creative soul to the call of the real'. But the real is seen and understood differently by different persons. Here lies the reason why the art of one nation differs from that of another. Naturally, the arts of a country in a particular period establish a tradition of their own. Thus we talk of oriental art, western art, Renaissance art, Persian art, Islamic art, Rajput art, Pahari art, Madhubani art and Bengal art. All these varieties of arts have certain inherent characteristics and dimensions which stand for its specific identity.

When we call Bengal art, it implies a particular type and characterizes of art having developed in the temperament and tradition of Bengal. But it is notable that human cultures and arts cannot be absolutely confined to one particular mode occurring for ages; they have

the power and resilience to combine and create new variations. This power of flexibility and capacity of assimilation in art prove the truth that there exists a profound unity of human psychology. This explains why in a specific art, other elements and influences found unhampered expression. The art of one nation differs from that of another. Naturally, the arts of a country in a particular period establish a tradition of their own. Thus when we talk of western art, oriental art or Indian art it implies some particular characteristics, temperament and condition which are embedded and rooted in these respective arts. This explains why in Indian art, the Persian elements and so many other influences found unhampered expression. Like Greek influence in Gandhara art, Persian influence in Bengal art.

‘Art is a solitary pedestrian, who walks alone among the multitude, continually assimilating various experiences, unclassifiable and uncatalogued’.⁸ So art does not follow blindly any custom or fashion, but embodies eternal values, as all artists are endowed with God-given gift of instinct of eternal values. Naturally, the art we call Bengal art must possess ‘an inner quality’ which reflexes the local taste and temperament. It is not ‘an artificially imposed formalism’⁹ but local manifestations which make it unique and distinguish from other set of art.

Hegelian Discourse and Bengal Art:

Now we may return to the Hegelian discourse and try to find if there is any scope or possibility to identify Bengal art in Hegelian framework of definition. Our supposition is simply a speculation. Hegel has identified three fundamental stages in the historical development of art viz. Symbolic, Classical and Romantic. Each phase made appearance in a specific culture. The symbolic stage emerged in ancient India and Persia and reached its peak in ancient Egypt around 3000 BC. This has further been divided into three sub-phases: Unconscious Symbolism, Fantastic Symbolism and Genuine Symbolism. Unconscious symbolism may be found in oriental religions like Zoroastrianism when artists imitated sun, stars, fire, animals etc. The Fantastic symbolism may be visualized in ancient Hindu art wherein the notion of Brahma spread and the essence of Brahma was expressed in fanciful creations with many heads and many hands. On the other hand, the Genuine Symbolism emerged when human beings became capable of finding appropriate symbols to define the concept of divinity. Genuine Symbolism is revealed, according to Hegel, in Egyptian figure of Sphinx. Sphinx was shown to have a lower animal part out of which a human body struggles to come out. Another example of Genuine Symbolism appeared in Pyramid, the renowned Egyptian architecture. Pyramid, in Hegel’s view, signified a point of transition in the art of building construction. Pyramid’s character was determined by its socio-religious significance but its foundation and structure was based on certain mathematical plan. Here architecture grew as a power of expression.

Growth of the art of Greek sculpture ushered the era of classical age in Hegelian scheme of definition. During this period spirit begins to understand itself in a bodily form and *human mind began to penetrate physical matter*. Human figures that appeared in various types and varieties of

sculptures maintained elements of balance and harmony in depiction. The classical age emerged in ancient Greece and reached its peak in the second half of the fourth century BC.

The final stage in the development of art in historical context was the Romantic age when art began to be expressed in the forms of painting, music and poetry. Line, light, shadow and colour became the means of production in painting. It was the mature stage when the depiction of man's independence from sensuous material is well reflected. Romantic age coincided with the rise of Christianity and reached to zenith in the art of Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael around AD 1500. In this way, classification of art by Hegel was guided by a rule of hierarchy and each phase in the hierarchy of historical growth was fully expressed in a particular art form: the symbolic in architecture, the classical in sculpture and the Romantic in painting, music and poetry.¹⁰

Possibility of Identifying Bengal Art in Hegelian Framework:

Art is always an expression of the age and society in which it is produced. Determining the scope of an art in historical context is difficult and perplexing. What Hegel has said about the art in general and his discourse on specific art particularly Indian, oriental or even Islamic art has long been a subject of debate. Art historians have criticized Hegel and also found him to be biased to certain extent in context of his definition and explanation. Hence Hegelian style of definition and the criteria adopted by him may not be a standard form or yardstick to explain the growth of art forms of each and every civilization.

So far as India was concerned Hegel's source of information had some constraints. Hegel classified his information on India into two types— one that belonged to 'the past' and the second that was of 'recent times'. For his recent knowledge about India he had studied the writings of Sir William Jones who founded the Asiatic Society in 1784. Hegel noted that 'in the light of new studies one should hesitate to use the earlier works even if they are the result of much labour, because they did not have access to the authentic source'.¹¹ Hegel's sources on past was J. J. Brucker's compendium like *Historia Critica* (published in 1747) and some other works. He had also consulted the work of Alexander Dow who translated *Tarikh-i Farishta* from Persian to English in 1792.¹² Besides, he had consulted some French and German sources too. Hegel died in 1831. He was not able to consult even the work of Alberuni which was first translated from Arabic into English in 1888 by Edward C. Sachau, a German scholar. He must have been able to consult Upanishad, the Persian rendering of which was done by Dara Shikoh, the elder son of Shah Jahan in 1657 and it came to the notice of Europe not before 1775, and it was translated into Latin in 1801-02 by Anquetil Daperron (1731-1805, the renowned French Indologist).¹³ Hegel may have consulted the Latin version. One could accrue about Indian philosophy and religion from these literary sources which were certainly not sufficient to frame a solid view of Indian philosophy and art.

Hegel's commentary on Indian art revolved around Indian myths and symbols. His knowledge about Indian art was meager, for which he was not responsible, because by that time

India's major archaeological sites were undiscovered. When Hegel wrote on India, Harappan civilization was totally unknown to the world. It was in the 1920s when Harappan culture was discovered and this pushed the recorded history of India by 5000 years. The Ajanta caves of Maharashtra in which is preserved the finest paintings spanning a period from 2nd century BC to 650 AD was discovered in 1819 by a British army officer while he was on hunting. The famous Paharpur Buddhist site was discovered in 1807 by Buchanan Hamilton. Some preliminary excavations were done there in 1875 and 1879 by Westmacott and Alexander Cunningham. But extensive excavation and research began in 1923. Other discoveries came later. Had these vast archaeological evidences which tell a marvelous story of India's history, life, culture and art been available to Hegel his view and interpretation of Indian art would have certainly been very different. However, Hegel's discourse definitely sheds some light and gives us hints to determine and identify the growth of art not strictly following Hegelian scheme but some strands and clues may be taken from him.

Now we may return to Bengal art. Is there any possibility of Identifying Bengal Art in Hegelian Framework? Is there any scope to determine the symbolic, classical and Romantic stages in Bengal art? When we talk Bengal art it is, in fact, an ocean of aesthetic representations. It includes huge multiplicity and dimensions of architecture, sculpture, paleography, calligraphy, paintings, manuscriptology and so many other forms of arts ranging from at least early Pala period, if not Mauryan period, to the modern time and now extended to the post-modern period. It is very difficult to make an empirical estimate to frame a theoretical approach maintaining a kind of connectivity from one broad period to the other without breaking the fundamental elements and characteristics. However, the observation of the French scholar Antoine-Yves Goquet may guide us in this connection. Goquet has argued that 'architecture must develop from the simple to complex, and was most likely the first art to be invented because it is the most directly related to basic human needs....'¹⁴ This is true in case of all ancient civilizations. Building construction for living and fulfilling the needs in accord with socio-religious beliefs has been the very first art of every ancient civilization. Use of material as well as design, shape and size of architecture resonate the necessity, skill and aesthetic aspect of the society.

History reveals that the most common material in any form of architecture was mud bricks and baked bricks. Use of clay bricks in architecture has a long history in Indian and other civilizations of the world. In India the useage of clay bricks starts from the time of Harappan culture. Ruins of the Indus Valley Civilization, excavated at Harappa and Mohenjodaro, show the widespread use of bricks in all kinds of building construction and town planning system and decoration. World's oldest residential university of Nalanda, dating back to 500 BC is a landmark of ancient building in brick. By this time, bricks were routinely used in China as well.

So far as Bengal is concerned the use of clay bricks and terracotta plaques for building construction in ancient and early medieval period discovered from Paharpur, Mahasthangarh, Mainamati, Chadraketugarh and other Buddhist sites are the fine example of artistic depictions

entailing spiritual belief and life pattern. The architecture of this time is often found assorted with sculpture and artistic expression in its wider ranges and dimensions found in Bengal was totally indigenous.¹⁵ Perhaps it was the preserved and hidden intellect of the people that appeared in this period. The art historians who have worked and specialized on this subject might be inclined to call it the first phase of the classical art in Bengal so far as the use of clay bricks and terracotta plaques and depictions of art and aesthetic patterns were concerned.

The second phase ushered perhaps during the sultanate period when a large number of mosques, mausoleums, minarets and other varieties of buildings were constructed in the region. The chief feature of these buildings was again the use of clay bricks and terracotta plaques. These clay bricks in most of the cases had a variety of designs and aesthetic patterns. But the depiction of human and animal figures became scarcer. Abstract and geometric designs along with floral patterns and various forms of calligraphy dominated the tastes of the time. Sometimes, one particular design spreads over hundreds of bricks and each brick had a special place in that design. Craftsmanship developed in different dimension. The purpose of the beautiful art patterns during this period was not simply decoration and ornamentation; these art designs and patterns say something that was deeply embedded into the philosophy and beliefs dominating in the society.¹⁶ This was the reason that the Persian and Islamic art began to flow in Bengal. Soon the Persian and Islamic art began to be twisted and patterned into the local climate. In this way, the preserved and hidden intellect began to progressively merge with acquired intellect in this stage.

But climax of the manufacture and use of clay brick and terracotta plaques is seen in the temples of 17th and 18th centuries. In almost every village of Bengal, both West Bengal and Bangladesh, carved and moulded baked-clay panels produced by the humble folk artists, adorned the brick-work temples, depicting scenes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. They also offer glimpses into daily rural life as well as socio-economic pattern of the people. Procession of warriors, lines of elephants and horses, local zamindars riding in palanquins as well as the boat and ship motives give such an insight to the society, culture and economy of Bengal which is often not visualised in written documents. It would appear, whether someone agrees or disagrees here, that this was the zenith of visual depiction in any form of art in Bengal. It was perhaps the Romantic phase, at least, in the art of clay bricks and terracotta plaques in the region. It was during this phase that we find the depiction not only in culture and belief but representation of life in broader spectrum covering economy and trade and even international trade and commerce.¹⁷ Had Hegel had a visual journey of the Bengal art expressed in clay bricks and terracotta plaques starting from Paharpur, Mahasthangarh and Chadraketugarh to Gaur, Pandua and Bankura, Birbhum, Burdwan, Hughly, Dinajpur and various other places in West Bengal and Bangladesh he must have changed his opinion about Indian art and amended his philosophy of art.

* Key-note Address of the 11th International Congress on Bengal Art, 2015, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

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