

The Best of
Sri Aurobindo Circle



Revisiting some of the timeless writings from the vast archives of
Sri Aurobindo Circle, an annual journal published from
1945 to 1998.

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*Mirrored in the Inconscient's boundless sleep,
Creation's search for self began its stir.
A spirit dreamed in the crude cosmic whirl,
Mind flowed unknowing in the sap of life
And Matter's breasts suckled the divine Idea.
A miracle of the Absolute was born;
Infinity put on a finite soul,
All ocean lived within a wandering drop,
A time-made body housed the Illimitable.
To live this Mystery out our souls came here.*

~ Sri Aurobindo, Savitri, The World-Stair

Sri Aurobindo and Indian Aesthetics

Beloo Mehra

The essay titled *Sri Aurobindo and Indian Aesthetics* by Sisirkumar Ghose was first published in the 1968 issue of *Sri Aurobindo Circle*, a journal published annually by Sri Aurobindo Society. Featured here is the full essay in three parts, with updated references and slight reformatting to make online reading more comfortable. Each part has been given a different title to bring out its essential point.



The author emphasises that Sri Aurobindo has not merely theorised about the deeply subjective and spiritual tradition of Indian aesthetics, but through his spiritual poetry he has actually renewed this *sanatana* tradition and made it a living truth for the modern sensibility. He gives examples from several poems of Sri Aurobindo to illustrate the deeper sense of the Indian aesthetic vision which is essentially universal, because the essential aspect of this vision is that true art must lead to an experience of “infinite wideness” or *citta vistara*. Through his analysis and examples the author helps us understand the principle, the process, the purpose and the philosophy of the universal aesthetics that underlie the seer-poetry of Sri Aurobindo. Readers will also find links to a few videos inspired by some of poems mentioned in the essay.



Sri Aurobindo's Re-affirmation of the Indian or Spiritual Tradition in Aesthetics

Sisirkumar Ghose



Talking about the uncritical critics of Indian art, or Indian values in art, Sri Aurobindo had written:

But everyone who has at all the Indian spirit and feeling, can at least give some account of the main, the central things which constitute for him the appeal of Indian painting, sculpture and architecture. This is all that I shall attempt, for it will be in itself the best defence and justification of Indian culture on its side of aesthetic significance.¹

¹ CWSA [Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo], 20: 261

As part of this modest attempt to “give some account of the main, the central things” he wrote *The Significance of Indian Art*². Brief but characteristic, it contains the pith of his argument, and will interest and profit anyone who cares for the higher values of life. But here we shall not speak of his work as expositor.

Sri Aurobindo has done something even more important, sent the roots rain, made the archetypal awareness live again. Along with his other creative works, in his later poetry especially, he has re-affirmed the basic Indian or spiritual tradition in aesthetics, and renewed that possibility once again. Nothing short of bringing back the new-old way of beholding, of a subjective interpretation of the self and the world, it is to this creative aspect of his works, a poetic, experiential restatement of the ancient (or is it perennial?) experience, the Great Tradition, that I wish to draw your attention.

I shall, therefore, pass over other attempts at interpreting Indian aesthetic attitude and achievement. These are no doubt valid and include the work of eminent men like Ananda Commaraswamy, Abanindranath and Rabindranath. And how can we forget such sympathetic outsiders as Fergusson, Havell, Zimmer, Codrington, Rowlands and others?

There are also the scholarly, sometimes comparative, studies of the texts and principles of aesthetics, of different ages and schools, by Kane, De, Hiriyana, Dasgupta, Raghavan, Pandey, Chaudhury, Krishnamoorthy and others. Much as we owe to these histories, translations, explications, they operate, as a rule, on the circumference rather than at the centre. What the critics write, or wrangle, about and about, Sri Aurobindo’s poetry is, the thing- in-itself.

Only an artist-thinker, with similar outlook, intensity and poised serenity, the “calm strength” of the old Masters which he valued so much, could do that. This is where Sri Aurobindo, mystic and poet, triumphs over others. He breathes life into dogmatics. As Claudel had said of Rimbaud, he becomes almost an argument for a return to faith. In Sri Aurobindo’s case it is not merely a return but a prelude to going forward, an invitation to fresh embodiment. He makes it new.

² These essays are presently found in Volume 20 of Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo.

The Aesthetics of Creative Harmony

Sri Aurobindo's rootedness does not make a fetish of the forms of the past. That way he is not a conservative but a true follower of the *sanatana* tradition. What would else have remained bloodless categories, dry-as-dust exposition, or at best an exercise in nostalgia, in his hands they come alive and reveal "the rhythmic sense of hidden things". This the modern world has all but lost. It is precisely here that Sri Aurobindo's significance stands out so clearly, as a giver of life. In these poems he does not so much theorise as actualise, "realize".

He communicates a "state of consciousness in its concrete actuality", and the state of consciousness is not confined to any one sect or tradition or aspect. It is large enough to contain all variations, the entire spectrum. Integral and inclusive, its value to the future, to the enlarging experience of the race, is or could be immense.

Aesthetics, the aesthetics of creative harmony, is of the essence of the Indian as of the Aurobindean world-view or life-world, *Lebenswelt*. Even his ideal of a spiritual life and society reveals aesthetic overtones. One is not surprised to find him saying towards the end of *The Life Divine*:

The delight of the Spirit is ever new, the forms of beauty it takes innumerable, its godhead ever young and the taste of delight, *rasa*, of the Infinite eternal and inexhaustible. The gnostic manifestation of life would be more full and fruitful and its interest more vivid than the creative interest of the Ignorance; it would be a greater and happier constant miracle.³

In this absolute, aesthetic, Aurobindonian view:

Beauty is his footprint showing us where he has passed...
A communion of spiritual entities,
A genius of creative immanence
Makes all creation deeply intimate:
A fourth dimension of aesthetic sense
Where all is in ourselves, ourselves in all,
To the cosmic wideness re-aligns our souls.⁴

In this view, that is in terms of this experience, beauty is a key to the supreme, a communion of "moved identity": Where all is in ourselves, ourselves in all. It reveals the

³ CWSA, 22: 1106-1107

⁴ *Savitri*, CWSA, 33: 112

aesthetic roots of our Being, justifies the world as an aesthetic experience. It is the highest reward, the equation of *Brahmasvada* and *Rasasvada*.

Behind the multiple, mutable forms that arise only to vanish, the sometimes beautiful objects, there stands a changeless Essence, an Essence that can be nothing other than the Bliss of Self. Out of this has come all creation and towards it all things move, the Super-Nature behind the Nature we see. In the poet's own expressive words in *Bliss of Identity*⁵:

All Nature is taught in radiant ways to move,
All beings are in myself embraced.
O fiery boundless Heart of joy and love,
How art thou beating in a mortal's breast!

It is Thy rapture flaming through my nerves
And all my cells and atoms thrill with Thee;
My body Thy vessel is and only serves
As a living wine-cup of Thy ecstasy.

I am a centre of Thy golden light
And I its vast and vague circumference;
Thou art my soul great, luminous and white
And Thine my mind and will and glowing sense.

Thy spirit's infinite breath I feel in me;
My life is a throb of Thy eternity.



⁵ CWSA, 2: 601

From Delight All Things Are Born

Ancient Indian wisdom, with its objective correlative, aesthetics, was based on nothing so much as the deathless doctrine or seed-idea of Ananda, or the principle of Bliss or Delight as the matrix of manifestation. In the well-known words of the Taittiriya Upanishad: *ānandādhyeva khalvimāni bhūtāni jāyante | ānandena jātāni jīvanti | ānandaṁ prayantya bhisarṁviśantīti* | ‘From Delight all things are born, by Delight they exist and grow, to Delight they return.’

Again: *yato vāco nivartante | aprāpya manasā saha | ānandaṁ brahmaṇo vidvān* | ‘The delight of the Eternal from which words turn away without attaining and the mind also returns baffled, who knows the delight of the Eternal?’ The answer is, the poets and mystics do, as much as is possible. Without them we would have no reason to speak or suspect of these things, the aesthetics of the spirit. In *The Bliss of Brahman*⁶ we hear:

I am swallowed in a foam-white sea of bliss,
I am a curving wave of God’s delight,
A shapeless flow of happy passionate light,
A whirlpool of the streams of Paradise.
I am a cup of His felicities,
A thunderblast of His golden ecstasy’s might,
A fire of joy upon creation’s height;
I am His rapture’s wonderful abyss.

I am drunken with the glory of the Lord,
I am vanquished by the beauty of the Unborn;
I have looked alive on the Eternal’s face.
My mind is cloven by His radiant sword,
My heart by His beatific touch is torn,
My life is a meteor-dust of His flaming Grace.

And “since infinite Beauty seeks for form”, the world is not wished away as an unreality or illusion. On the contrary, we learn the secret of earthly perfection:

“To seize the absolute in shapes that pass,
To feel the eternal’s touch in time-made things,
That is the law of all perfection here.”⁷

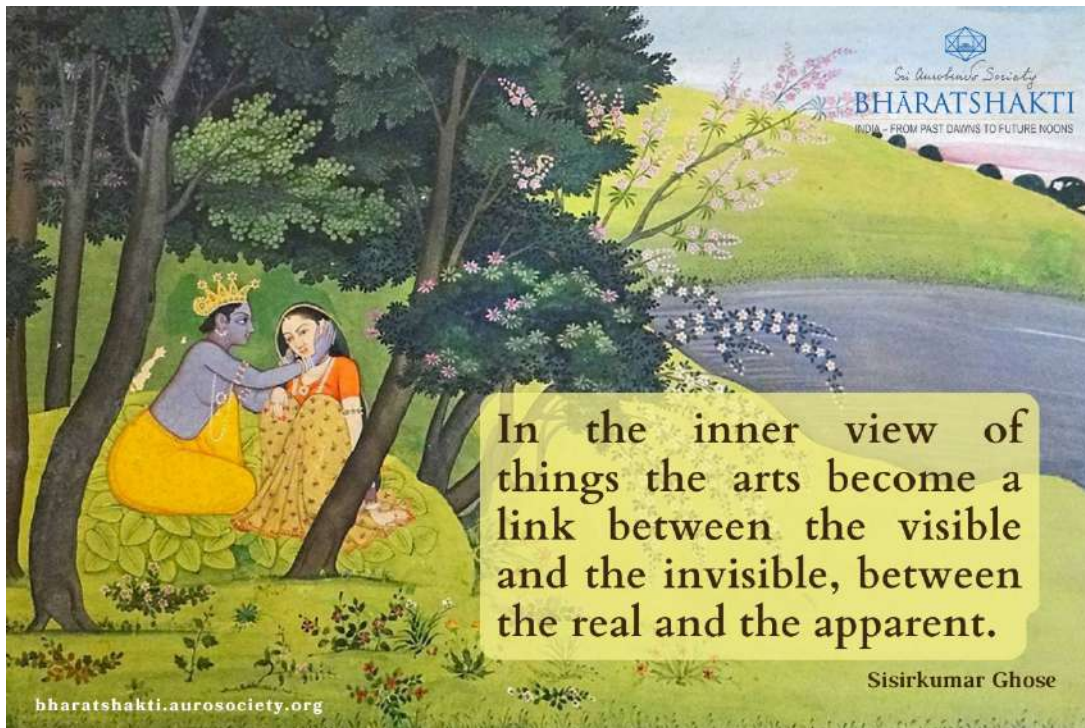
⁶ CWSA, 2: 616

⁷ *Savitri*, CWSA 33: 108



The Secret of Earthly Perfection

Sisirkumar Ghose



In the inner view of things the arts become a link between the visible and the invisible, between the real and the apparent. Why should this be so? One reason for this is because they are related to a theory of participation and potentiality. That is, all earthly beauty reveals itself as beauty by participation—in His essence.

In the Katha and Mundaka Upanishads we hear: *tameva bhāntamanubhāti sarvaṁ tasya bhāsā sarvamidaṁ vibhāti*, ‘All that shines here is but the shadow of His shining, all this universe is effulgent with His light.’ Or, in the simpler language of Tagore: The physical is the shadow of the psychic. More explicitly, “For the Indian mind form does not exist except as a creation of the spirit.”¹ The idea is not exclusively Indian, it is echoed in Plato and Plotinus, in nearly all mystical literature. Sri Aurobindo’s sonnet, *The Divine Hearing*², belongs to that living tradition, the language of heightened awareness, when

¹ CWSA, 20: 270

² CWSA, 2: 622

All sounds, all voices have become Thy voice:
 Music and thunder, and the cry of birds,
 Life's babble of her sorrows and joys.
 Cadence of human speech and murmured words,

The laughter of the sea's enormous mirth,
 The winged plane purring through the conquered air,
 The auto's trumpet-song of speed to earth,
 The machine's reluctant drone, the siren's blare

Blowing upon the windy horn of Space
 A call of distance and of mystery,
 Memories of sun-bright lands and ocean-ways,—
 All now are wonder-tones and themes of Thee.

**A secret harmony steals through the blind heart
 And all grows beautiful because Thou art.**

The companion poem, *Divine Sight*, confirms the same attitude and experience.

WATCH	
<u>The Divine Hearing</u>	<u>Divine Sight</u>

From this “ecstasy of vision” to Indian iconography, to those ageless forms of cosmic powers and consciousness, is but a step. According to the Indian philosophy of worship, with which are closely allied the origins of art, the *ishta devatā* or chosen form of deity is but one's own ideal self, *svarupa*. Through the appropriate ritual or contemplation, *dhyāna*, and worship, *pujā*, the devotee is enjoined to be at-one or identified with it. Essentially, it is the recovery of a lost identity: Thou art That.

The image one makes or worships is at once lamp and mirror. The embodiment is a chance for the embodied, not to be pooh-poohed, as is sometimes done by the extreme, intolerant ascetic schools. That would be poor psychology indeed. The emphasis on contemplation, *dhyāna*, preceding creation is part of the traditional theory. There are numerous texts in support. But the poet's evidence, the artist's natural concentration of energy before a work of art can actualize is more telling. Listen to *The Stone Goddess*³:

³ CWSA, 2: 608

In a town of gods, housed in a little shrine,
 From sculptured limbs the Godhead looked at me,—
 A living Presence, deathless and divine,
 A Form that harboured all infinity.

The great World-Mother and her mighty will
 Inhabited the earth's abysmal sleep,
 Voiceless, omnipotent, inscrutable,
 Mute in the desert and the sky and deep.

Now veiled with mind she dwells and speaks no word,
 Voiceless, inscrutable, omniscient,
 Hiding until our soul has seen, has heard
 The secret of her strange embodiment,

One in the worshipper and the immobile shape,
 A beauty and mystery flesh or stone can drape.

WATCH

The Stone Goddess

To understand this “beauty and mystery” one must know something of the cosmic self or consciousness. In *The Indwelling Universal*⁴ we are told:

All eyes that look on me are my sole eyes;
 The one heart that beats within all breasts is mine.

But even here there are distinctions to make, depths within depths. The cosmic self or consciousness would seem to imply, if not depend on, the doctrine of the two souls or selves in man: *There are two beings in my single self* (Sri Aurobindo, *The Dual Being*⁵).

There is still another. For, in its turn, it is supported by a total, moveless Calm and, on the peaks, by the Transcendence itself: *My vast transcendence holds the cosmic whirl* (Sri Aurobindo, *The Indwelling Universal*). In *Cosmic Consciousness*⁶ the poet tells us:

⁴ CWSA, 2: 601

⁵ CWSA, 2: 610

⁶ CWAA, 2: 603

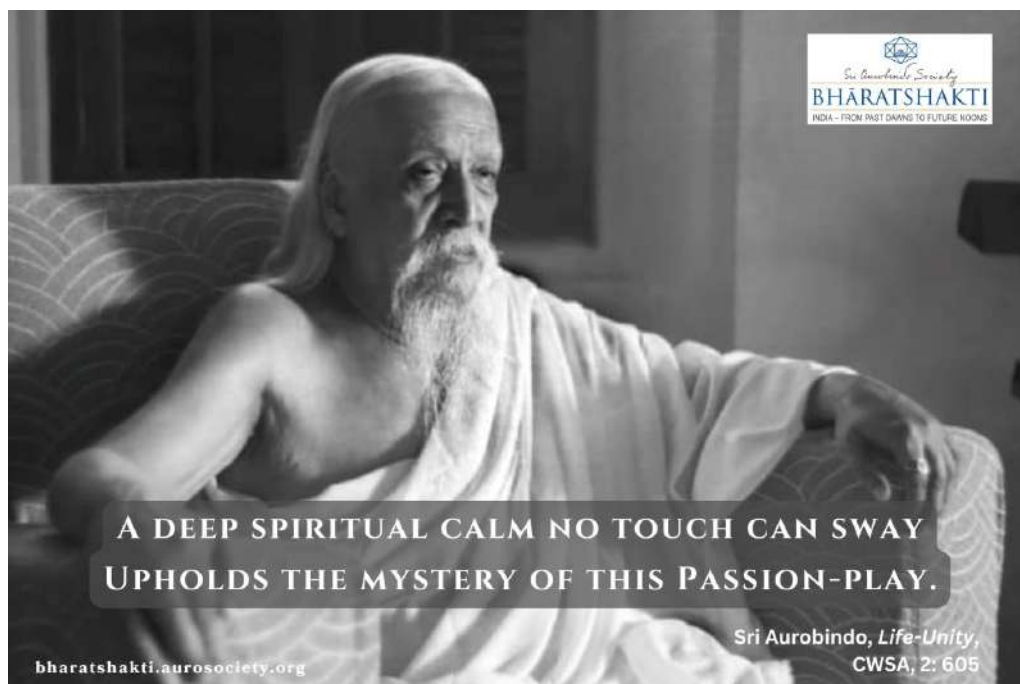
I have learned a close identity with all,
Yet am by nothing bound that I become;

A “deep spiritual calm...upholds the mystery of this Passion-play” or *lila*. (Sri Aurobindo, *Life-Unity*⁷)

I housed within my heart the life of things,
All hearts athrob in the world I felt as mine;
I shared the joy that in creation sings
And drank its sorrow like a poignant wine.

I have felt the anger in another’s breast,
All passions poured through my world-self their waves;
One love I shared in a million bosoms expressed.
I am the beast man slays, the beast he saves.
I spread life’s burning wings of rapture and pain;
Black fire and gold fire strove towards one bliss:
I rose by them towards a supernal plane
Of power and love and deathless ecstasies.

A deep spiritual calm no touch can sway
Upholds the mystery of this Passion-play.



⁷ CWSA, 2: 605

It is the “secret touch” of the Ground Above that explains how I have become “what before Time I was” (Sri Aurobindo, *The Self’s Infinity*). And the Voice that now speaks is not that of the empirical ego but of a new centre of personality, one-with-all and with the Ground. It is during such hours or moments of encounter with Being that Watched by the inner Witness’ moveless peace are revealed

The heart of a world in which all hearts are one,
A Silence on the mountains of delight.
(Sri Aurobindo, *The Universal Incarnation*⁸)

This heart of a world is close to being world-free, to that sense of release or liberation, *mukti*, which the Indian mind has always believed to be the Final End of life. In the older view, art has, not unnaturally, been held to be conducive to freedom or salvation, *muktipradayi*. That it means or leads to a release from the ego and its restricting categories is a matter of immediate and universal experience.

The release does not come by any moral diktat or “criticism of life” but by earned vision, by, to use Eliot’s phrase, a raid on the absolute. On the borders of that Ineffable or *anirvacaniya* freedom becomes the food of the free, the hero’s meed:

My mind, my soul grow larger than all Space;
Time founders in that vastness glad and nude:
The body fades, an outline, a dim trace,
A memory in the spirit’s solitude.

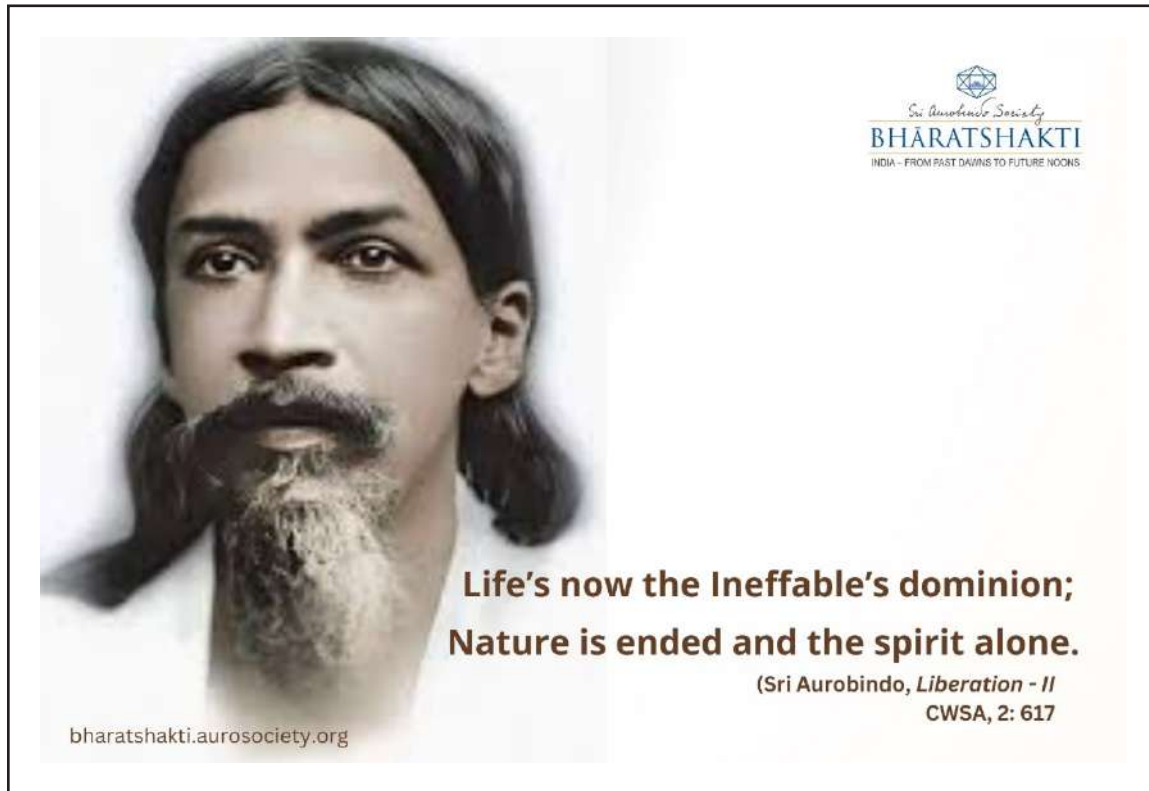
This universe is a vanishing circumstance
In the glory of a white infinity
Beautiful and bare for the Immortal’s dance,
House-room of my immense felicity.

In the thrilled happy giant void within
Thought lost in light and passion drowned in bliss,
Changing into a stillness hyaline,
Obey the edict of the Eternal’s peace.

Life’s now the Ineffable’s dominion;
Nature is ended and the spirit alone.
(Sri Aurobindo, *Liberation – II*⁹)

⁸ CWSA, 2: 607

⁹ CWSA, 2: 617



But this living on heights does not come easily and is hardly to be sustained for long. To the majority the “immense felicity” declares itself more often as an agony or a longing for the buried self—that Arnold knew so well—and which Sri Aurobindo has expressed thus:

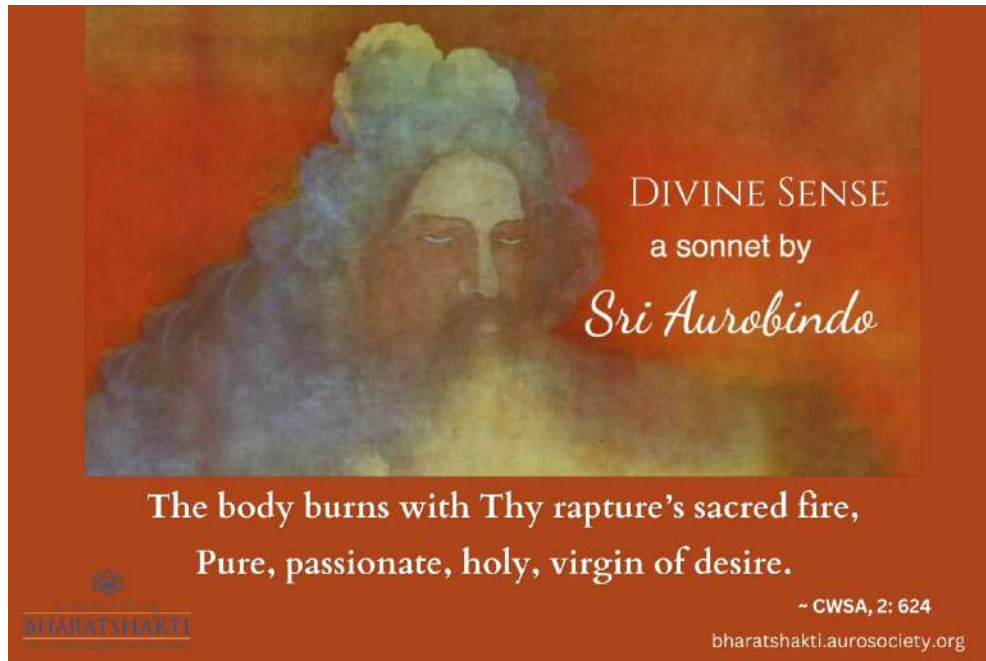
A sacred yearning lingered in its trace,
The worship of a Presence and a Power
Too perfect to be held by death-bound hearts,
The prescience of a marvellous birth to come.
Only a little the god-light can stay:
Spiritual beauty illumining human sight
Lines with its passion and mystery Matter's mask
And squanders eternity on a beat of Time.
(*Savitri*¹⁰)

¹⁰ CWSA, 33: 5



The Lasting Value of Indian Aesthetics

Sisirkumar Ghose



Thus arises the hope to replace by realised dreams the memory of her lost memory [like] “temples hewn as if by exiled gods / To imitate their lost eternity” (Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*¹). All man’s offerings are at the altar of that temple that is forever building. To a deeper view the body itself is that temple, and for those with such realisation the need for fixed rituals is over. This is another freedom or inner fullness offered by art at its highest. And those who realise this freedom and fullness do not, necessarily, dissolve or break away. Rather they unite the opposites, the life of action and the inner life come together, a seamless reality:

... on meditating peaks
Where life and being are a sacrament
Offered to the Reality beyond...
(Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*²)

The body burns with Thy rapture’s sacred fire,
Pure, passionate, holy, virgin of desire.
(Sri Aurobindo, *Divine Sense*)³

¹ CWSA, 34: 378

² CWSA, 33: 191

³ CWSA, 2: 624

In that “sacred fire”, “ever-burning Revelation’s fire”, all dross is destroyed. Every act and movement is lighted up and, as we have said earlier, the need for external worship or *bahyapuja* is no longer binding. **An art of open and universal worship, sacramental attitude is among the promises of the growing psychic or aesthetic life.** For “In my heart’s chamber lives the unworshipped God.” (Sri Aurobindo, *Omnipresence*⁴).

Now each finite thing one sees is but a facade or mask of the reality beyond. As the scales fall there comes to view “the divinity of a symbol universe” (*Savitri*⁵), “these yet unimagined harmonies, The fate and privilege of unborn men” (*The Silver Call*⁶). Before the awakened eyes pass “proud deities and magnificent fates”.

Faces and hands come near from Paradise.
What shines above, waits darkling here in us:
Bliss unattained our future’s birthright is,
Beauty of our dim souls grows amorous,
We are the heirs of infinite widenesses.
(Sri Aurobindo, *The Call of the Impossible*⁷)

<p style="text-align: center;">Watch</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>The Call of the Impossible</u></p>
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This “infinite wideness” or *citta vistara* is the essential gift of the aesthetic factor. It is also the essence of all truly human culture. Not only does beauty, traced to its original home, give a non-temporal quality to our experience, but it also reconciles opposites. It alone can evaporate disagreeables, as Coleridge said of the poetic imagination. **There is nothing, however dreadful or contrary, that art cannot change into its own and use as a medium for meaningful experience.** A marriage of opposites is always a mark of maturity, the creative formula. It is a test of great art that it alone can “reconcile the Eternal with the Abyss” (*Savitri*⁸). For reconciliation and not escape or palliation is the answer, the Aurobindonian answer, to the Riddle of the World.

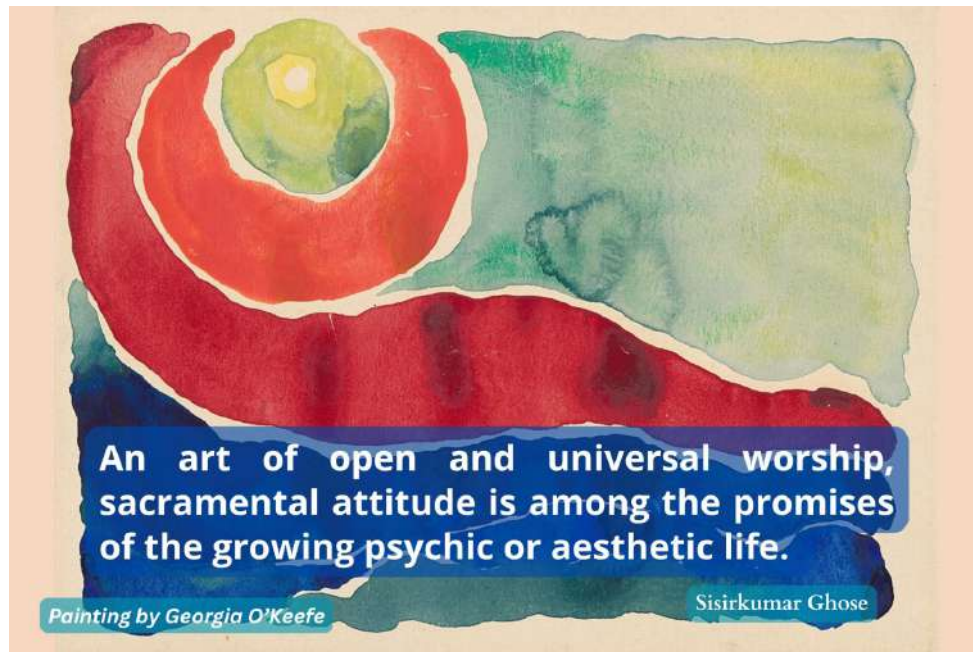
⁴ CWSA, 2: 620

⁵ CWSA, 33: 176

⁶ CWSA, 2: 594

⁷ CWSA, 2: 595

⁸ CWSA, 33: 196



To sum up: **art and beauty, as Indian culture and Sri Aurobindo see these things, cure us of the chaos and insignificance of our lives.** They are our guarantee of meaning and satisfaction (*rasena trptah*). Angels of the upward way, they ease our ascent to awareness, or self-discovery, and ultimately bring us close to the bliss of pure Being, “the one Being’s sole immobile Bliss” (Sri Aurobindo, *Liberation*⁹). In a word, the waking bliss of self-existence.

A purifying agent of conscious evolution, art helps us to distinguish the laws of our being from biological and economic accidents and determinisms. Its real task is to point to an intenser form and “clarity of consciousness,” *atmasamskrti*. Thus understood, art is an aid towards the transvaluation of values, perhaps our true history.

A strange and grandiose symbol was his birth
And immortality and spirit-room
And pure perfection and a shadowless bliss
Are this afflicted creature’s mighty fate.
(Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*¹⁰)

Thanks to the logic and language of our growing destiny the material sky, field of our troubled and mundane existence, is lit up with some word, hue, glory or passion from here or elsewhere. Then:

⁹ CWSA, 2: 604

¹⁰ CWSA, 33: 340

In an outbreak of the might of secret Spirit,
In Life and Matter's answer of delight,
Some face of deathless beauty could be caught
That gave immortality to a moment's joy,
Some word that could incarnate highest Truth
Leaped out from a chance tension of the soul,
Some hue of the Absolute could fall on life,
Some glory of knowledge and intuitive sight,
Some passion of the rapturous heart of Love.
(Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*¹¹)

Yet, it is remarkable, the great masters, old and new, speak but little of rules and techniques which seem to be all the cry today. Thus, if Sri Aurobindo refers but rarely to canons of art, or *silpa sastras*, like *Manasara*, *Pratimalaksanam*, *Vishnudharmottaram* and the like, it is not because he is unaware of their historical or technical importance but because he does not wish to be bound by the letter of the law. He does not legislate beauty's form or manner of embodiment, he rather leaves the creative mystery a mystery, a dim analogue of the Creator's mind:

A Mystery's process is the universe...
Into its form the Child is ever born
Who lives for ever in the vasts of God,...
Mirrored in the Inconscient's boundless sleep,
Creation's search for self began its stir.
A spirit dreamed in the crude cosmic whirl,
Mind flowed unknowing in the sap of life
And Matter's breasts suckled the divine Idea.
A miracle of the Absolute was born;
Infinity put on a finite soul,
All ocean lived within a wandering drop,
A time-made body housed the Illimitable.
To live this Mystery out our souls came here.
(Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*¹²)

In the unfinished task, of making whole the fragment-being that we are, art and beauty are part of the mystery of inner life, "a self-luminous mystery" such as even our outer life and world might become one day:

¹¹ CWSA, 33: 175-176

¹² CWSA, 33: 100-101

A splendour of self-creation from the peaks,
 A transfiguration in the mystic depths,
 A happier cosmic working could begin
 And fashion the world-shape in him anew,
 God found in Nature, Nature fulfilled in God.
 (Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*¹³)

All told, there have been few like Sri Aurobindo who, both by example and precept, has brought home to us the rationale of what he himself calls universal aesthetics, its principle, process and purpose, its poetry no less than its philosophy. Here, indeed, is the best defence and justification of Indian culture on its side of aesthetic significance, by establishing the aesthetic principle right at the head of the ontological series, the cosmic process. One only wishes it could be embodied anew, on all levels of being and society.

That apart, it is of the essence of aesthetic experience to be shared. Thanks to our poet we too, as *sahrdayas*, may look into the life of forms and things, the creative moods of the Infinite:

One who has made in sport the suns and seas
 Mirrors in our being his immense caprice.
 (Sri Aurobindo, *Lila*¹⁴)

Watch

Lila

But in the Aurobindonian view man is not only a mirror of the cosmos. He is one whose “nature grows,—His soul the dim bud of God’s flaming rose” (Sri Aurobindo, *Man, the Mediator*¹⁵). The call is the call of the self within, the creative daemon, and the rose is the rose of God, “great wisdom-bloom on the summits of being”.

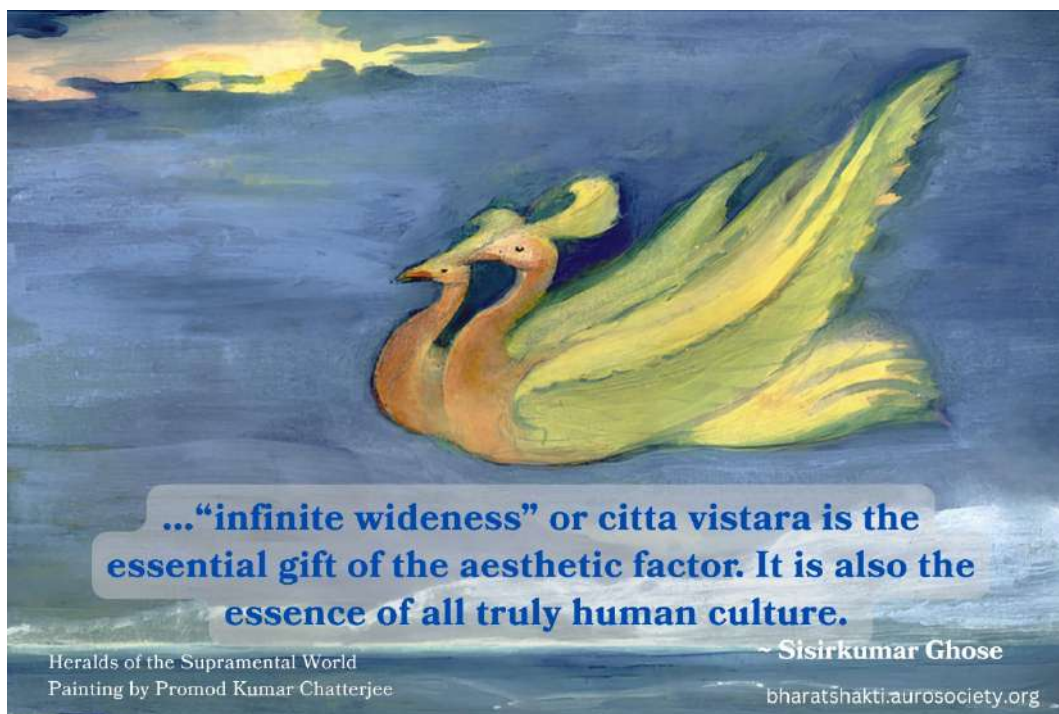
Rose of God, great wisdom-bloom on the summits of being,
 Rose of Light, immaculate core of the ultimate seeing!
 Live in the mind of our earthhood; O golden Mystery, flower,
 Sun on the head of the Timeless, guest of the marvellous Hour.
 (Sri Aurobindo, *Rose of God*¹⁶)

¹³ CWSA, 33: 36-37

¹⁴ CWSA, 2: 611

¹⁵ CWSA, 2: 596

¹⁶ CWSA, 2: 564



Only when we have learnt this Joyful Wisdom can we help “beauty conquer the resisting world”¹⁷. This is a long way off, but this is what we are waiting for, the transformation of nature in “a perfect harmony combining in itself the integral development of our many-sided potentialities”¹⁸, and all life become a Hymn to Beauty. In our beginning is our end. In the words of Krishna Chaitanya, “The terminal of evolution is the same state of poetic relishing that initiated it”. Beauty, angel of surplus,¹⁹ makes possible a more than biological adjustment, adds a new dimension to our life. Without art man would be “only an insect crawling among other ephemeral insects on a speck of surface mud and water which has managed to form itself amid the appalling immensities of the physical universe”²⁰. **It is the lasting value of Sri Aurobindo and of Indian aesthetics that it proposes a different and deeper reading of the human situation, saves us from the blight of disharmony, uglification and the general insignificance that is the lot of man today.**

¹⁷ CWSA, 33: 55

¹⁸ CWSA, 21: 229

¹⁹ The phrase is used by Rabindranath Tagore

²⁰ CWSA, 21: 48

