

BODY-ART-SPIRITUALITY

A Reflection Rooted in Earth and Life

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Abstract: Both the creative mind of an artist and spiritual seeker participate intimately in the world they observe. They serve to understand the nature and function of reality as a whole. For a meaningful journey the inquiry has to be into the body and through the body - not outside of it.

Body can corrupt. It can tempt us to remain concerned with minor interests, but this temptation has its limits. The corruption that the mind can indulge in, however, is beyond imagination. The cause and effect of much of our tension today is the indulgence of mind. When we speak about reality, attempting to reveal its mystery, we inevitably speak in contradictions. The role of a creative mind is to perceive the realms of reality that contradict the gushing force of everyday reality. To make a pause, to recognise the subtler realms that help us re-enter the reality with a new vision.

Keywords: Art, Body, Creativity, Kabir, Life, Sankaracharya, Spirituality

1. Introduction: Nature of Creativity

What is common in relation to both art and spirituality is creativity – a way of seeing. Spirituality is concerned with experiencing life in all its relations as non-fragmented reality. It aims to see all phases of life in this connection. So also today is the role of art. It seeks to enter the realms that were once the domain of religion: the inner realm – the realm of mystery.

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The creative mind of the artist and the creative mind of the spiritual seeker both participate intimately in the world they observe. Both serve to understand the nature and function of reality as a whole.

Other means of perception such as social, political or economic will be concerned with immediate interests and are aimed toward application in specific contexts that have use value. This gives a sense of security and certainty and a manufactured sense of purpose and meaning. It perpetuates a fragmented notion of self, mutating the possibility of true inner blossoming.

People with different preoccupations would perceive reality differently. For example, a river. One person may see the quantum of water that is flowing and wasted and conceive of a large dam for centralised agriculture, the production of electricity, a Water Park, and so on. Someone else may conceive of smaller dams for decentralised developmental works. A third would see how the river connects life and different communities, and a fourth would see how his or her own journey is like that of a river, eagerly flowing to join the ocean, Supreme God. And a tribal would again perceive it differently. Once I asked the people of the Narmada River why they resisted the construction of dams and refused to move away. They said, "How can we? The river courses through our veins." With our perception and participation in the world, both the observed and the observer are affected.

The journey of a creative mind is like the flowing of water. It travels in all possible ways: penetrating, soaking, filling, overflowing, refilling and travelling endlessly - not stopping for a moment, experiencing every possible emotion, be it love, joy, agony, anger, helplessness or hope, making one capable of recognizing the mystery and the re-enchantment of the world.

A concern that we hold today is that our minds increasingly start settling on the minor interests of immediately perceivable reality: life, self, family, community, nation-state, and so on. This, as David Bohm says, "tends to break the psyche of man

into conflicting fragments making a whole-hearted total approach to life impossible.”¹

2. To See Everything that the Bird’s Eye Sees

The Dronacharya, who was teaching archery to *Pandavas*, once asked the five what they saw, pointing to a tree. When all the brothers described various things they saw on the tree, the leaves, flowers, fruits, the bird, its feathers, colour of feather, etc. Arguna saw only the eye of the bird. For long we have hailed this single pointed-focus and target that Arguna had. This ideal has got perverted through time. The single-pointed focus on the prey has ended up as a disregard of all that surrounds it.

Now there is a need to focus beyond the bird’s eye and to see everything that is seen through its eye. There is a need to see with regard and respect everything that supports the bird’s existence. For that is also the foundation of our own existence.

To know is not to subjugate or exploit, but to cherish a coexisting. Make ourselves beyond just I, me, and myself.

3. The Relevance of Body as a Whole

For a meaningful journey the inquiry has to be into the body and through the body – not outside of it. But for reasons that both are and are not known, the body has continued to be under the shadow of our mind, burdened with doubt and prejudice. Even so, the emphasis on body has surfaced in various scriptures and spiritual discourses from time to time.

There is a narrative performed in northern Kerala about Sankaracharya, the founder of Advaita philosophy (non-dualism). After Sankaracharya mastered the sacred texts and all the arts to be learned, he prepared himself to ascend the throne of omniscience. On his way he came upon a chandala – a ‘low born’ – who was drinking from a pot of palm liquor, carrying a knife, and leaping, and falling, and muttering abuses. Beside him, his wife carried their child, which now and then he would fondle. All of them were in rags and stained with mud.

¹David Bhom, *On Creativity*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2012, 35.

Seeing the chandala obstructing and polluting his way, Sankara shouted, “You ignorant evil-minded man. Don’t you know to get out of the way of a Brahmin? Don’t stand on the path!”

The chandala replied: “What do you mean by the path and who should get off the path? Can you discriminate between truth and untruth, the perennial and the ephemeral, the sacred and the profane, the abstract and the concrete? Is it with full knowledge of the body, its constituents, desires, states of sleep and dreaming and wakefulness, its life-breath and sub-life-breath, that you order us off the path?”

A long debate ensued between the two men. As it proceeded, Sankara realized that the man before him was in fact Lord Shiva himself, with his wife Parvathi. Sankara then fell at his feet to ask for forgiveness and salvation, and the Lord gave him his blessing.

The ‘low born’ chandala is a defender of the abundance of earthly life, revealed through the ordinary and encompassing the innumerable forms that fill the world. He comes from the Pulaya community of northern Kerala, considered as the children of the soil. All that he brings—the pot of palm liquor, the woman he loves, the child he fondles, the knife that cuts, their bodies smeared with mud—are powerful symbols of bodily life. The entire argument is thus founded on the body, its constituents, its relationships, and its journey. It is an argument for the body and for reclaiming its path.²

Katha Upanishad invites us to seek the god within and in everything that surrounds us.

The immortal self is the sun shining in the sky, he is the breeze blowing in space, he is the fire burning on the altar, he is the guest dwelling in the house, he is in all men, he is in the gods, he is in the ether, he is wherever there is truth, he is the fish that is born in the water, he is the plant that

²C. F. John and Thomas Pruiksma, *Body and Earth*, Kozhikod: Elements, 2015, 90 - 92.

grows in the soil, he is the river that gushes from the mountain, he the changeless reality, he is the illimitable.³
The God is within and out. Seek him in the immediate as well as in the beyond:

Filled with Brahman are the things we see,
Filled with Brahman are the things we see not,
From out of Brahman floweth all that is;
From Brahman all – yet is he still the same
Om... peace – peace – peace.⁴

Among the sages known to us, Kabir has celebrated body in all its mystery and enchantments. He saw the Supreme tightening the strings that his body is and drew from it the Supreme melody. He sang and danced. The melody filled the days and nights. It made the hills and the sea and the earth dance. The world of man danced in laughter and tears. He says, “Why put on the robe of the monk, and live aloof from the world in lonely pride? Behold! My heart dances in the delight of a hundred arts, and the creator is well pleased.”⁵

Within this earthen vessel are bowers and groves,
and within it is the Creator;
Within this vessel are the seven oceans
and the unnumbered stars
The touchstone and the jewel-appraiser are within;
And within this vessel the eternal soundeth,
and the spring wells up.
Kabir says: Listen to me, my friend!
My beloved Lord is within.⁶

4. Body-Mind

Body can corrupt. It can tempt us to remain concerned with minor interests, but this temptation has its limits. The

³Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal*, New York, New American Library, 1948, 22.

⁴Prabhavananda and Manchester, *The Upanishads*, 26.

⁵Rabindranath Tagore, *Complete Works of Rabindranath Tagore*, Delhi: M. B. D. Publishers and Distributors, 844.

⁶Tagore, *Complete Works*, 835.

corruption that the mind can indulge in, however, is beyond imagination. The cause and effect of much of our tension today is the indulgence of mind.

According to *Isha Upanishad*, preoccupation with only the body or only that spirit throws us into deep darkness.

To darkness are they doomed who worship only the body, and to greater darkness they who worship only the spirit.

....

Worship of the body alone leads to one result, worship of the spirit leads to another. So have we heard from the wise.

They who worship both the body and the spirit, by the body overcome death, and by the spirit achieve immortality.⁷

Kabir says again:

To WHAT shore would you cross, O my heart?

There is no traveller before you, there is no road:

Where is the movement, where is the rest, on the shore?

There is no water; no boat, no boatman, is there;

There is not so much as a rope to tow the boat,

nor a man to draw it.

No earth, no sky, no time, no thing, is there:

no shore, no ford!

There, there is neither body nor mind:

and where is the place that shall still the thirst of the soul?

You shall find naught in that emptiness.

Be strong, and enter into your own body:

for there your foothold is firm.

Consider it well, O my heart! Go not elsewhere.

Kabir says: Put all imaginations away and stand fast in that which you are.⁸ Another verse soaks us in the divine:

O lotus, why did you fade?

The water of the pond was at your stem.

You were born to water, lived in water,

all the time surrounded by water.

⁷Prabhavananda and Manchester, *The Upanishads*, 27-28.

⁸Tagore, *Complete Works*, 840.

No fire was there nearby.
And yet why did you die?⁹

5. The Contradictions

When we speak about this reality, attempting to reveal its mystery, we inevitably speak in contradictions. When sound is sculpted to make alphabets, alphabets arranged to form words, words arranged to form sentences and paragraphs, we are far removed from the first sound, resulting in speaking in contradictions. But all those who have smelled the vibe of the sound and remember its echo would see no contradiction. Even in contradiction they would be able to see the smell, hear the colour, and taste the sound.

The role of a creative mind is to perceive the realms of reality that contradict the gushing force of everyday reality. To make a pause, to recognise the subtler realms that help us re-enter the reality with a new vision. There we experience freedom from the forces that are the cause and effect of much of our tension today. Interestingly, the force of everyday reality is forceful and dynamic to subsume everything that is interesting. In its eagerness to claim, it puts forth a bargain, the only bargain it is familiar with: money, power and fame. As a result, strangely, certain art that appears loud these days is bred in the nest of these bargains. Even proclaimed subversive expressions are sponsored by the same forces that are the cause for the concerns that the art claims to enter. Hence the art that is hyped and circulated today stands as a superstructure over our heads, creating the illusion of having a purpose and a rightful place in society. To this effect, David Bhom is of the opinion that

... artists express, present a state of confusion, uncertainty, and conflict, probably hoping to obtain mastery over them.... But the fact is that no conflict is ever resolved merely by expressing it... and actually the conflict generally goes on as before, the better feeling being largely based on illusion. ...

⁹Tagore, *Complete Works*.

As was clear in the best teachings of ancient religions, the proper way to deal with conflict is to look at it directly by being aware of the full meaning of what one is doing and thinking.¹⁰

6. Subversive Nature of body

For an art to be able to reveal the true nature of the immediate along with the beyond, it should know first the subversive nature of body. We all are aware of the persisting power of life; but forgotten, for convenience, is how life has inhabited death within it. Death is the counterforce of life. It is death that makes every moment fresh. The beauty of the blossom is rooted in death. Death is as beautiful as the arousal of life. It is only by recognising death that we understand the true nature of life. This recognition makes us free. A creative mind knows this inner working of body and time, knows to enter it. And the arts that sprout from it would remain fresh.

With the help of the bargaining powers of the world we cannot grasp the power of a sprouting seed. We cannot experience the tickling of the branches when they spout the buds and flowers, and the learning of the tree from the earth to share with the sky. Only when we open our senses to our inner senses we can know the inner workings of reality.

7. The Persistence of Art

Some time ago I heard a tribal from Waynadu singing. He sings so that his bones are not broken: an honesty in which the creative process is vital to his own existence. Without it, he cannot grasp, negotiate and resolve his own existence in relation to all. Art persists through time serving all with meanings that one is eager to accept. In spite of any kind of appropriation or containment by systems, art will continue to sprout out of souls serving its meanings. For there always will be souls seeking freedom, finding their true meanings, wanting to mend fragments, and envisioning the undivided whole.

¹⁰Bhom, *On Creativity*, 37.

How we can get lost and become helpless like a bee intoxicated with the smell of the honey of the elanje tree (*Mimusopselengi*). And celebrate a freedom that is worth celebrating, staying in the rightful place. Anything and everything deserves and desires for its rightful place in reality. Taking away its place is to take away its dignity. The role of art is to recognise, affirm and reclaim the dignity of all.

The first step of a creative mind, in this regard, is to see everything the bird’s eye sees before we shoot it down. Because if we take the bird without seeing what it has seen, the bird will take the branch and the branch will take the trunk, the trunk will take the roots, the roots the soil, the soil the springs, the springs the river, and the clouds, the air, the space and everything that is woven in and with and nurtures our body. And the soul is nurtured by the body. All would be taken away.

8. Conclusion: The Nest

Sometimes we spot them –
the birds rushing with twigs, grass, and feathers.

An urgency that is sacred.
An anticipation, a purposefulness.

We smell them in the air, the trees, and the soil.

A silent song.

A continuum she has no control over.

But her body is all eyes,
watching all the eyes –

the boy, the snake, the cat,
and the storm spiralling up.

What would you call it,

this persistence
of sacred duty?