CHAPTER I

SRI AUROBINDO'S CONCEPTION OF BEAUTY

'To find highest beauty is to find God; to reveal, to embody, to create, as we say, highest beauty is to bring out of our souls the living image and power of God.'

Man has an imperative instinct for beauty. The pursuit of beauty has been an important occupation of man from the dawn of civilization. There is a profound intrinsic delight and beauty in all things and behind all experience and man awakens to them in his aesthetic moments. His search for beauty leads him on to the search for the other two essential elements of reality, viz. Truth and Goodness, and helps him to find God which, Sri Aurobindo asserts, is the highest aim of the aesthetic being. Sri Aurobindo's conception of beauty is an integral one comprising as it does the western view of beauty as a value in life and in aid to happiness and the Indian view of beauty as an expression of ananda and the experience of beauty as a means to moksha.

1 The Human Cycle, Vol. 15, p. 135
Truth, goodness and beauty are the three cardinal values which one looks for in everything, in every experience. These values have been held to be abstract principles in the highly intellectualised western philosophies. But to the spiritually oriented Indian minds, they are not mere concepts or abstract principles but living experiences. An intellectual view of beauty considers it to be an objective quality inhering in things, a property of things independent of a perceiving mind.

A discovery of this beauty is possible only to a mind which is inwardly aware of this quality called beauty. The realisation of beauty by the individual consciousness in its aesthetic moments thus introduces the subjective element into the picture. Beauty then is not a mere objective principle or a subjective element. The subjective and the objective as opposing principles are sublimated and transcended in the process of the discovery of beauty. The subject in its total awareness of the object arrives at a state of total identity with it when its aesthetic value is perceived. This fusion of the consciousness of the subject and the object leading to their total identity is most fundamental to artistic creation. Hence a work of art can be said not to effect a communication but only a communion in which the creator and the critic, attaining to an identical state of consciousness participate.
That there is a strong subjective element in artistic appreciation and perception is evident from the striking differences in the appreciation and evaluation of any given work of art. All the same it does not mean that it is the individual mind or senses which invest the things in life and Nature with Beauty. Beauty, Sri Aurobindo asserts, inheres in them even before one perceives and identifies it. It exists in a 'multitudinous variation' of forms appealing to a multitudinous variation of human consciousness: it produces different effects on different people according to the level of their consciousness. The higher the consciousness the greater is the value one derives from a piece of art. A heightened consciousness alone is capable of perceiving the higher beauty of Nature and art. Even the differences in individual tastes and the intensity of one's participation in the enjoyment of the beauty of things are to be traced to the level of one's consciousness. The heightening and widening of one's consciousness is a matter of one's individual effort or śādhanā: the more evolved one is, the higher is his consciousness.

Discussing the nature of beauty in 'The Harmony of Virtue', Sri Aurobindo says that 'beauty is that which fills us with a sense of satisfying pleasure and perfect fitness'. According to him the three elements of beauty are colour,
Beauty lies in a harmonious proportion of these three elements. Beauty may exist in any one of these, in combination of any two of these as well as in a blend of all the three elements. The criticism of ages, he observes, has assigned the highest scale of beauty to those forms which blend the three elements and the lowest to those which boast only of one. The comparison between the various arts is based mainly on how many of these elements of beauty are combined in those artistic products and the quality or nature of beauty is adjudged from the way in which the elements of beauty are blended; the more perfectly blended the elements are, the more satisfying completeness is the result; in other words, the more harmoniously blended the elements are, the more beautiful is the aesthetic object. Thus the general effect of beauty is harmony, the ulterior cause proportion. Variety which is the soul of proportion relieves the stiff monotony of sameness and its meaningless rigidity and want of proportion and is thus another contributory factor to beauty.

This perfect blending of parts, this harmony, is very much evident in Nature; it runs through the warp and woof of Nature. It is the business of art to reproduce this harmony and the beauty of it with such imaginative additions and alterations as are necessary in order to highlight the beauty of her forms. In this process art sometimes exceeds Nature
and produces a perfection not to be perceived in reality. In one of his stray thoughts, Sri Aurobindo observes: 'Art holds the mirror up to nature that nature may see her own image beside that of art and realise her own deformity and imperfections.'

Beauty, in Sri Aurobindo's view, is the special divine manifestation in the physical; it is, hence, the way in which the physical expresses the divine. It expresses itself through the form, yet its law is spiritual and inward; but the form need not be a physical shape: it can also be abstract, as when we speak of a beautiful thought or a beautiful soul. Beauty is a form of ananda or delight in manifestation; this ananda is not ordinary mental or vital delight in things.

Beauty which is an expression of ananda becomes indistinguishably one with ananda itself beyond a certain point. Expression becomes the thing expressed itself in due course and thus Beauty and Delight become one and the same. "Aesthetically the delight takes the appearance of kasa and the enjoyment of this kasa is the mind's and the vital's reaction to the perception of beauty."

In Indian thought the concept of beauty (saundarya) is closely connected with the metaphysical concept of bliss.

2 The Harmony of Virtue: Vol. 3, p. 72
3 The Future Poetry, Vol. 9, p. 492
(Ananda). The Upanishads say that cosmic creation has its origin, its being, life and sustenance in and from Ananda: "Anandam brahmeti vyajhanat. Anandadyeva khalvimani bhutan jayante. Anandena jatani jivanti Anandam prayantyabhisamvisanti." Cosmic beauty has its basis and source in Brahman. Hence Vedanta regards Brahman itself as the ultimate in beauty. The highest good or the ultimate value in the philosophy of the Upanishads is a state of rapture or ecstasy, (Ananda) in which the creature becomes one with the Creator, or realises his oneness with Him. This is the highest form of aesthetic experience, the experience of Beauty. Man can experience this beauty intrinsically and positively in the innermost essence of his being. In such a transcendent state knowledge becomes synonymous with enjoyment.

Beauty can only be experienced through feeling, not known or understood with reason. It defies rationality while reason in turn dispels it. The very attempt to understand it, to systematise it, to find some universal formula for it is a futile and self-defeating one: it is a mere violation of beauty.

4 Taittiriya Upanisad III. 6. 1-4. "Ananda itself is Brahman, the Eternal, wherfore all things are born, wherein they grow and exist and where to they all return."
According to Walter Peter, beauty is a relative value; to attempt to define it precisely is unmeaningful and useless. At the same time, it is not wholly relative which is evident from the fact that certain works of art in spite of the changes and fluctuations of tastes and fashions over the centuries, have stood the test of time and remained universally accepted masterpieces.

The aesthetic experience thus implies a universal criterion. There is an aesthetic quality in things which is recognisable. Beauty as a human value is communicable, universal and objectively perceivable. Sri Aurobindo subscribes to this theory of beauty.

The artistic genius in man has a direct vision of beauty in a flash of inspiration or through an act of intuition. This genius, though rare, is not the monopoly of the privileged few. Every man, it is said, is an inarticulate poet; so is everyone capable of intuiting the Beautiful, which lives in and impels all thinking things and objects of all thought. As ultimate perfection and divinisation of life is a certainty, according to Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution, the creation and appreciation of beauty must be a universal characteristic.

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5 P.N. Srinivasachari, 'The Philosophy of the Beautiful!', Mylapore, 1958, p. 32
of man, depending only upon the evolution of his consciousness.

Coleridge defines beauty as 'Multeity in Unity', 'in which the many, still seen as many, become one.' The Beautiful arises from the perceived harmony of an object, whether sight or sound, with the inborn and constitutive rules of the judgement and imagination: and it is always intuitive. His view of beauty and the beautiful has close resemblance to that of the mystics who have experienced beauty 'as the subjection of matter to spirit so as to be transformed into a symbol, in and through which the spirit reveals itself.' The soul welcomes the beautiful as connatural it as it participates in its essence. Sri Aurobindo who holds a similar view of beauty asserts that to find beauty is to find God. This lays bare his unshaken faith in beauty as an unmistakable aspect of the Absolute, the Saccidananda. Beauty is of a piece with the Essence, the Absolute, and is hence real; it inheres not only in the perceiver but in the perceived as well, in the subject as much as in the object. It is here

7 Ibid., p. 239
8 Shri Krishna Mishra, 'Coleridge and Abhinavagupta' Darbhanga, 1979, p. 240
that Sri Aurobindo differs from Śaṅkara. According to Śaṅkara, beauty or mundane beauty, associated as it is with perceptible objects of phenomenal existence, is merely an appearance of Reality. Phenomenal reality from the standpoint of essential reality is unreal, insubstantial, illusory. Beauty, perceived as a quality or a characteristic of this illusory phenomenal world, then, must itself be illusory. According to Sri Aurobindo beauty resides in God’s creations and the ascent is from the beauty and the ascent is from the beauty of the world to the world of Beauty. We see shadowy manifestations of the Eternal Beauty of Brahman in the various beautiful objects of this world and from our sensuous realisation of the beauty of nature and the beauty of life around us we ascend to a realisation of Beauty in itself in the transcendental sense of the Brahman-centred inner harmony of the universe where beauty becomes co-eval with bliss.9

Sri Aurobindo, though he does not deny the distinction between phenomenal existence and essential reality, yet rejects the illusionism of Śaṅkara and accepts the reality of the world. He subscribes to the philosophy of Visisṭādvaita as expounded by Rāmānuja. He holds the view that the cosmos is a concord and not a discord, and being the product of the Śrī śakti of love of God, is a veritable living expression of the infinite

9 T.P. Ramachandran, The Indian Philosophy of Beauty, Part I (The University of Madras, 1979), p. 52