Swami Narayanprasad Das: A Mystic Painter

Art, like religion, grows from the soil of life. The closer they are, the richer and more living they be. No wonder, hence, that Swami Narayanprasad of B.A.P.S Swaminarayan cult, up to his neck in the service of God and the people, creates most extraordinary and unusual paintings throbbing with life and light, metaphysical and mystical. He largely, steers away from the mundane and the earthly. In quest of the Divine, his imagination tends to be spiritual and even his wonderful landscapes, skycapes, and seascapes, at once, are subtle inscapes. They are all beautiful metaphors, exuding not only delight and subtle instruction but peace and harmony, all leading to something beyond the horizon. Symbols and allegories are as vital as the inner life. He is off-the-beaten track, following no school, no fashion, no trend. All this, perhaps, because he is a born artist, if artists were ever born. He has had no formal training nor schooling in any art school. His art is innate and hence the perfect harmony of art and nature. He is a painter whose works are often supernatural in a special connotation. He is, in a way, unique, neither traditional nor modern or postmodern. No 'isms' obsess him. It is art which is mystic, cosmic, and poetic. Nevertheless, sometimes he faintly reminds us of William Blake or even Cezanne with his empty spaces though!

The artist is intensely introspective, so much so that in most subtle ways his landscapes are inhering not merely the physical interior but also, the human anatomy disguised as nature! Predominantly, he is a nature painter, sojourning into religion and mysticism. His range is limitless to the extent that it seems often to transcend the limits of canvas, and sprawls vastly in our consciousness. He often paints spiritual chemistry or perennial bliss, the sea of fire, fountains falling at their own sweet will from the giddy mountain peaks, the ascending lanes to some vast, divine unknown and often pretty allegories of the human consciousness with all
its virtues and vices. It seems that to this artist-monk life is much larger than art, but the Divine is supreme, which is all pervasive. He does not hesitate even to capture chaos with as much deft and understanding as harmony, as if Croce had told him, "Unless there is chaos within you cannot see the dancing star." Even the steep hills or the woods, dark and deep, are the part of the pilgrim's progress; the elements of nature, earth, air, water, fire and sky are the vital constituents of Narayanprasad's paintings; never cities or maddening crowds; hardly ever mortals, or even the human forms. His visions are absolutely unique, at times, even obscure unless viewed in depth; but always beautiful even if disturbing.

The artist accentuates the mystery of creativity and creation in tune with the infinite. His brush reaches far beyond space and time in quest of the Divine, and we hear the sound of eternal music, unheard sweet and silent melodies of the earth and the sky. What is striking as well as intriguing about his art is its near lack of perspective, which is indicative of the chief technique of religious art. Sartre writes, "Perspective is profane, sometimes even a profanation, for it attempts to reshape the creation of God." But the art such as this recreates the cosmos with the sole purpose of celebrating the Divine; that way his cosmic consciousness works.

No less an artist than Deviprasad Roy Chowdhari, who saw tremendous struggle for far greater achievement in his nascent art, said, "My knowledge, I must admit, falls far short of the range of his imagination." Salvador Dalli, too, was so impressed that he invited this saint-artist to work with him for some time. All along, he has been exploring the glory of God, in the outer and inner spaces. Canvas, brush, and colors are too inadequate tools to capture his cosmic visions. What is really fascinating about his art is the way it blurs the line of demarcation between painting and poetry, as his thematic concerns cover Shakespeare, Keats, Shelly, also Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, besides the central
themes of *Vachanamrit*, Lord Swaminarayan's gospel, as well as those of
the Indian poets like Tagore, Kabir, Kant and others.

The artist has lost the track of his countless paintings. But still
several are displayed in the art galleries, museums, universities and even
international airports. Recognition, though delayed, has come, though
unsolicited. While offering IBC Lifetime Achievement Award from
Cambridge, England, Nicholas Law, the director, wrote saying, "I now
take pleasure in sending you a special invitation to join the ranks of
professionals and academics from across the globe." From the U.S.A., he
received "Lifetime Nominee of the Research Board of Advisors", "Man of
the year Gold Medal", "The World Medal of Freedom for Mystical and
Spiritual Art." "Great Minds of the 21st Century", etc. All this culminating
in "Einstein Genius Dedication For Mystical, Spiritual Arts." But the saint
is astonishingly indifferent.

Swami hardly ever mentions anything of the sort. He, with great
humility, attributes all this to the grace and inspiration of his great Gurus,
Revered Shri Yogiji Maharaj and Guru Hari Shri Pramukh Swami
Maharaj. He is their 'brush' as it were! He feels that, at times, light from
heaven is his guiding star.