

SOCIAL FACTORS IN AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Aesthetic experience is the experience which we have in the contemplation of beauty of any kind, in nature, in art or in social relations; and which gives rise in the beholder to a certain peculiar feeling which we may call aesthetic joy. It is a social phenomenon springing from the creative impulse, interest in people and interest in the world of reality and imagination which the artist has for them in his mind. On the basis of this creative impulse and interest he gives expression in creative form to some profound emotion or great thought which he wishes to share with other people. The artist or nature comes to the beholder with a gift-the gift of harmony, unity, completeness, purity and relief. To accept and appreciate this gift with profound knowledge and emotional warmth is aesthetic experience. This gift when so appreciated gives aesthetic joy. While we go deep into aesthetic experience, the self is forgotten, and there is a kind of absorption in the beautiful object a feeling of complete unity, freedom and completeness. Aesthetic experience has two characteristics which distinguishes it from other kinds of experiences intellectual and moral. It is different from them as it is the contemplation of beauty which the beautiful objects or their memory give rise in us; and secondly the joy which we get from aesthetic experience is disinterested, detached, impersonal, universal, permanent and pleasurable in revival in memory.

But it does not mean that in getting aesthetic experience we require a distinct kind of mental activity e.g. intuition, inspiration, imagination, insight or vision - the activity which is not regarded as essential in other kinds of experiences. We cannot divide the mind into different faculties, subscribing the different mental activities to different faculties, nor a man into so many men - an aesthetic man, a moral man, an intellectual man, a practical man and so on. In any

genuine experience all these elements inevitably enter; though in one form of experience, one mental process is predominant while in another form of experience, another kind of mental process is more required. Imagination e.g. plays an important part in aesthetic experience, perhaps more important part than in intellectual or moral experience. But knowledge, understanding etc., also have their share in it. Without them aesthetic experience is as difficult as intellectual or moral experience. Thus aesthetic experience is not different in kind from other experiences. It differs from others in emphasising one aspect of mental phenomenon i.e. affection. It emphasises affection, but it does not and cannot ignore the other two aspects of mental life - i.e. Cognition and Conation. They are and must be present in it. Though, no doubt, cognition and conation do not play so important a part in aesthetic experience as in intellectual and moral experiences respectively.

We have aesthetic experience when we perceive beautiful objects. But beauty lies everywhere - in nature, in art, in ideas, in ideals, in social relations, in moral endeavour, in economic activities - and thus we may get aesthetic experience from so many objects in this universe. But really speaking we choose only a few fragments and are inspired only by them. We are not inspired by each and every beautiful object. We select only a few objects - the objects which we regard as beautiful, and we get aesthetic experience only from them; other beautiful objects do not inspire us, we perceive them alright, but the beauty therein we do not appreciate. How do we choose these fragments to be inspired by them. Why do we regard only a few objects as beautiful and ignore other beautiful objects? These fragments are selected by us on two bases - subjective and objective. Personal aptitudes, individual interests, momentary moods, sentimental development are subjective elements. They are subjective in the relative sense of the term only; in their last analysis they are also determined, to a great extent, by social conditions. In objective conditions are included those social factors which determine the aesthetic experience, and which we will discuss in the following lines.

Aesthetic experience is neither intuitive, *apriori* nor is upon any inborn capacity. It is *aposteriori* in its nature; it is based upon experience. As in the selection of fragments, so in the determination of aesthetic experience, there are two kinds of bases - subjective and social. Subjectively speaking aesthetic experience is based upon

knowledge, imagination, emotion, association of ideas. Mental and physical health need not be mentioned here as it is the most essential quality of every kind of normal mental activity.

Knowledge is one of the most fundamental conditions of getting an aesthetic experience. Knowledge makes one not only a better observer, but the aesthetic experience is enriched because of one's knowledge. The depth of affection is based upon the height of cognition; and the height of cognition upon the richness of knowledge. Aesthetic experience without knowledge is shallow and of little value. This knowledge is gained from personal experiences as well as from the experiences of others. The former is better than the latter knowledge, whether direct or indirect, must not be superficial. The real knowledge, which is the result of scientific attitude of mind, is required. It is not satisfied with appearance but goes deep, and tries to find out the inner essence of the things. The importance of knowledge is not only direct but indirect too, as it forms part of all other conditions of aesthetic experience i.e. it plays an important part in imagination, emotion etc.

Imagination is another important basis of aesthetic experience. A man having little imagination can perceive the objects, but the perception will be a simple perception and cannot develop itself into an aesthetic or intellectual experience. It is through imagination that the artist reacts to the external world by expressing his own feelings. It penetrates into reality, in order to reveal that which cannot be reached by reason alone. The imagination required for aesthetic experience is not passive; but active and creative which works under a particular plan. The task of imagination is to produce a form. A form, to be artistic must be created, not copied or imitated. It must be created like a new thing, and should not be only a copy of the external objects. To enrich imagination, knowledge - real and scientific - is essential. Without this knowledge, imagination becomes free and uncontrolled; daydreaming rather than active imagination. Imagination must be based upon reality - not necessarily upon actuality - and should not base itself upon impossibilities and improbabilities.

Emotion and Association of ideas are some other essential bases without which we cannot get a rich aesthetic experience. Emotion may be defined and is defined by different psychologists in different ways, but one point is common in all of them and it is the

affective aspect, which is always very deep in every kind of emotion. Emotion is an intense feeling attached to a particular object - real, imaginary or in memory. Unless an object arouses a deep feeling - emotion - in us, aesthetic experience is not possible. We cannot get aesthetic experience from any object unless it touches us very deeply, consciously and rationally. The more deeply and consciously we are touched, the better aesthetic experience we get. But to be touched in this way is based upon the real knowledge of the object. Real knowledge is very essential to enrich the imagination and deepen the emotion. Emotions are so many in number; but love, wonder, curiosity, self-negation, self-assertion, awe, are comparatively of more importance in aesthetic experience than some others.

All these subjective bases of aesthetic experience are only relatively subjective. Leaving aside the organic conception of society, it is a fact that an individual is more intimately related with the society, than apparently it seems so. Knowledge we cannot get unless we are in a society, not only because of the fact that knowledge is mainly of the external and social objects, but also because it is the society which creates those conditions in which acquisition of knowledge is possible. So we may say that knowledge is the knowledge of the society, for the society but by the individual. The imagination of an artist does not work in void and in vacuum but in an historically concrete world, in traditions, what he has learned from his environment. It always forms part of some historical traditions and present circumstances. The matter upon which imagination is constructed is gathered from the world in which he lives historically and geographically. In the selection of fragments also, these social factors play an important part. A fragment of the universe inspires an artist, but his choice of one particular fragment rather than another depends on traditions and other social factors.

Now let us turn our attention to the social bases of aesthetic experience. Because of their complicated nature, action and reaction upon one another and upon individual knowledge, it is not an easy task to count all these different factors and the degree in which they separately influence the aesthetic experience. Of these the important factors are Environment, Tradition, Religion, Morality, Economy, National ideals and inspirations, schooling and training. In environment we include the physical environment and the climate. Environmental circumstances and physical conditions have comparatively little influence upon aesthetic experience but in

no case it is negligible. The same sunny day or rainy season may or may not give aesthetic experience to the people of different countries; similarly the same temperature is enjoyable in one season but not so in another. Environment has an indirect influence upon aesthetic experience through its influence upon other social factors.

Hereditary temperament and disposition and inherited customs of a people compose traditions. Every nation has its own traditions. These different traditions have some common points, but differ in other aspects. The culture of a nation is largely determined by those aspects which are peculiar to that nation. The common points either in different nations or in different ages are called universal aspects. These aspects - common or different - have a share in determining the nature and quality of aesthetic experience. The artist or the beholder with good traditions has a better, and richer aesthetic experience than the person who has no such traditions at his back. It is because of this fact that the cultured and civilized nations have great artists among them.

Religion is a very important factor in aesthetic experience. Religious zeal and sentiment enrich aesthetic experience and beautifies its expression. Beautiful temples and sublime dramas of the Greeks and their paintings and poetry, the great architecture of the Middle Ages and the great painting, Music and poetry of the Renaissance is a proof of it. Sentiments particularly religious are based upon feelings and thus they have a direct influence upon aesthetic experience.

Aesthetic Experience has great moral influence both upon the artist and the beholder. This influence is not the result of direct instruction and teaching, as art does never preach or teach directly, but indirectly through harmonizing and pacifying the emotions, relieving the tension, purifying the mind, and moderating the whole life. But on the other hand moral ideals and values also have a great influence upon aesthetic experience. It does not mean that a person having higher moral ideals must necessarily have a better and richer aesthetic experience, it simply means that these ideals may inspire him and thus he is in a better position to get richer aesthetic experience from the same ordinary objects, which do not inspire others.

The importance of economic factor in aesthetic experience cannot be over-emphasised. The history of the arts proves it beyond doubt, that art is conditioned not a little by economic circumstances. It is no accident that the greatest bursts of artistic production have occurred in wealthy and in leisure class societies as in Athens and Florence. It is only in a well-to-do society that the individuals have leisure to get aesthetic experience, and generally it is the higher and richer class even of these societies which produce a larger number of artists. Economically poor people have little mental peace to get aesthetic experience; if they get it, it is less frequent and relatively narrower in range. Exceptions may be there, but because of other social factors. It does not mean in no case, that there should be a class - a privileged class - in a society to promote the cause of art and literature. It simply means that art cannot progress unless the individuals are not trodden down under the physical needs. The physical needs should be satisfied before we can think of higher values. So progress in art is possible only when the nation as a whole is economically satisfied and has mental peace to devote itself to its progress.

Economic factor has thus great influence upon aesthetic experience, as it modifies the old and creates the new values - moral and aesthetic values.

National ideals and inspirations - political, educative, artistic, etc., have also their share in determining the aesthetic experience. The ideals reshape the whole nation and inspire it to change its destiny. They have their influence on each and every aspect of life, and thus aesthetic experience is also affected. They select the fragments of the universe which must inspire the individuals and also determine the nature of aesthetic experience. Plato was wrong to banish the artists from his ideal state, as a true artist cannot imagine to create a world less desirable than the actual world. But the Fascist dictators were justified, on Machiavellian principles, in banishing them as they were to be inspired by the high national ideals and more desirable world and must inspire the beholders for the same, which the dictators could in no way tolerate.

Schooling and training is of a great importance in getting aesthetic experience. Schooling and training comes under knowledge, no doubt, but it would be emphasised, as it means the knowledge of the technique and the form. For the artist this

knowledge of technique is of great importance, but even for the beholder it is not of less importance. Unless the individual is well-trained, he is not in a position to get aesthetic experience from any object even from the natural sceneries. Really speaking the importance of schooling and training need not be emphasised, as it is too evident.

Thus we see that getting an aesthetic experience depends to a very great extent, upon the social factors.

It is not only in its origin that the aesthetic experience is based upon social factors; in its expression, form, function and appreciation it is also determined to a great extent by the same factors. When aesthetic experience is expressed in one form or the other, the art is created. Creative impulse and our desire for self-expression is a very important condition of creating a piece of art. But there are some other conditions also. These are interest in our fellow beings and their doings, interest in the real world in which we live, and our desire to better it and bring it to a higher standard of values. In these different conditions the social influence is evident and so need not be discussed.

Aesthetic experience may be expressed in different forms. These forms of expressions are selected by the individual, no doubt, but for the society in which the artist lives. It is not for no reason that poetry and drama had progressed in Greece, architecture in Rome, painting in Italy. Different nations have different aptitudes and likings for some particular form of art and their artists generally conform to it. Otherwise the absence of sympathetic audience will benumb the creative impulse of the artists, and thus they would be left with only an incomplete Aesthetic experience.

As far as the function of aesthetic experience is concerned, it is not only enjoyment, though enjoyment is one of the important aims which aesthetic experience must achieve. Besides enjoyment, aesthetic experience, a deep and rich one, must achieve some other aims and objects, particularly after it is expressed in one form or the other. In this article it is not desirable to discuss the aims and objects which we want to achieve by the expression of aesthetic experience. It is easy to say but difficult to defend that aesthetic experience and its expression in any form is itself a valuable thing, and has no other ulterior purpose. Some other important aims of it

are advancement of knowledge, creation of beauty, redemption of the oppressed, enlargement of our sympathies, presentation of truth, educating the mind, pacifying the emotions, relieving of the worries.....And it is not difficult to see the social aspects of all these aims. No beholder can get aesthetic experience from any piece of art and appreciate it unless it achieves at least some of these aims. He enjoys art which solves his problems and betters his life. Does it mean that he enjoys the art because of utility and not because of beauty; no, it does not mean this, no, never. It simply means that utility and beauty are identical, or at least every beautiful object has its utility. Here one point must be kept in mind. The term utility must be used in its proper sense of the word and not only in a limited sense. Our problems are not only material and economic, but also mental and emotional. And if we use the word utility in this sense including mental and emotional usefulness, then, no doubt, utility includes beauty in it.

The relation between aesthetic experience and its subjective and social base is double-sided, of action and reaction. Aesthetic experience is not possible without them but in its turn, aesthetic experience helps them in their progress and advancement e.g. aesthetic experience is based upon knowledge, but it also produces knowledge otherwise it would be a useless form of fancy. The value of the knowledge imparted determines that of aesthetic experience and its expression. So a work of art performs its function properly when it gives us the most valuable knowledge of things - the knowledge of their essence. Aesthetic experience is one of the conditions as well as effects of material, moral and intellectual progress. The degree of its depth and richness and the excellence of its expression is one of the standards of judging the progress. Progress is in proportion to the higher quality of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience has a value. This value is realised through a process of evolution. It is in the process of realization. We are not satisfied with the beauty as we find it in nature and in the art of our predecessors. We try to create new objects of beauty of higher degree and value, and thus to realise it fully. It is realised to the same degree as all the different social values working in aesthetic experience are realised. The realization of one factor is dependent upon the realization of all other factors and vice versa; and thus from the progress of one, the progress in other aspects of life can be broadly measured. But no value can be fully realised, as all of them are in evolutionary process; the more we realise them, the higher

they go in their degree of excellence. The ideal is always away from our reach. It will never be achieved. It ought not to be achieved. The day it is reached, will be doomsday for humanity.