10

Almond Eyes and Lotus Feet
A Mirror of Indian Aesthetic Sensibility

Harsha V. Dehejia

All great civilisations have created works of art which embody their concept of beauty, and we in India have not only an ancient but equally a growing and evolving artistic tradition and culture. We have entrusted our deepest thoughts and cherished visions to our artists, be they poets or potters, śilpīs or saṅgītkāras. These objects of beauty and the discourse around them have endured as the enjoyment and contemplation of the beautiful is a hall mark of the rasika and is an essential value for us in the Indian tradition and further it defines what it is to be cultured and cultivated. The rasika or the cultivated connoisseur not only cohorts with objects of beauty but engages with it contemplatively. The beautiful is not only worthy of contemplation but we associate sundara with saubhāgya, the beautiful with what is auspicious and even more we equate sundara and aiśvarya or beauty and divinity. It is quite clear then that representing and understanding what is beautiful is an important part of the celebration of what it is to be an Indian.

The Indian tradition has enshrined the beautiful in the woman more than in any other object and even among women the woman in love, the śṛṅgāra rasa nāyikā or the romantic heroine is the most poetic and the most evocative in the tradiltion. In body and mind, through adornment and anticipation, in longing and belonging, in forest bowers and in opulent havelīs the śṛṅgāra rasa nāyikā embodies and represents what we consider beautiful. In her we not only have the poetry and the sensuality of the beautiful but even more the serenity and spirituality of beauty.

She is first and foremost prakṛti or materiality, endowed with sensual beauty and like prakṛti she is also the abode of growth and fertility which she shares with the world of nature around her. The beautiful woman is also saubhāgya and in representing her on temples and havelīs she performs an apotropic function and confers grace and auspiciousness on them. As śālabhañjikā, or the tree nymph she makes the aśoka tree blossom with the kick of her left foot and sensuous women are an integral part of temple architecture and the railings of stūpas. In the bhakti śṛṅgāra tradition the ātman, whether that of a man or woman, in its quest for the parātman, was considered female

for there could not be any greater or beautiful loving or longing than that of a nāyikā longing for her beloved. Thus the woman is central to much of Indian art and thought.

While artistic creativity cannot be probed beyond a certain point and must be left sacrosanct, a proper study of the aesthetic sensibility of our civilisation demands that what we consider beautiful be comprehended in its totality, that we search its often implied and suggested meanings and not just its surface appearance or the historical conditions surrounding that object. Only through an aesthetic and not historical inquiry will our concepts and expressions of beauty emerge and which must then be thoughtfully and meaningfully discoursed, for in so doing we will not only understand what we regard as beautiful but even more importantly define the very nature and texture, the ambience and the ethos of our civilisation. In this process it is essential that we underscore what is uniquely Indian in our aesthetic sensibility, for in this age of globalisation it is easy to blur the uniqueness of the artistic concepts and contributions of a civilisation. To do so would be an injustice to the majestic and grand contributions of the Indian artists. Not only have we in India discovered refined and magnificent philosophic truths that define the human condition, created religious systems that we can call our very own, but have fostered a sense of beauty that is uniquely Indian, all of which we have cherished, and which has driven our psyche, nourished our being and which have endured over millennia.

There are may ways in which an inquiry of the aesthetic sensibility of a civilisation can be undertaken. One way would be to enunciate universal artistic values and concepts of beauty that the tradition upholds, almost in a prescriptive or normative way, and then try and relate them to individual artistic expressions. This would be an un-Indian approach, for ours is not a monotheistic, one book, one prophet tradition but rather a pluralistic, syncretic and multi-centric tradition where we go from the particular to the universal, from man to god, from sundara to saundarya and from the earth to the sky. A better approach to study the Indian aesthetic sensibility is to pick up any thread from the rich Indian tapestry of artistic representations and follow its course and take it all the way to its origin, as in the web of Indian artistic creations the various art forms are inter-related, and one art object easily leads to another. This would lead us to aesthetic values that drive the Indian artistic tradition. It is almost like going up-stream in the river Gaṅgā and discovering its source at Gaṅgotrī and then understanding and celebrating the entire course of the river.

Let us make the śṛṅgāra rasa nāyikā or the romantic heroine of the arts our guide and mascot, for she occupies a central and cherished place in all our arts, be they literary, visual, plastic or the performing. An examination of her many attributes and the variegated hues of her persona would take us to some universal aesthetic concepts

and values of the tradition and give us a glimpse of what we in the tradition consider beautiful. In addition she will be our sūtradhāra as she leads us into palaces and havelīs, homes and hamlets and show us how we in India, whether it is the rājā or the prajā, make the beautiful a part of our daily life and living..

There is an interesting traditional legend of how a woman was created:

> In the beginning when Tvaṣṭrī, the divine artificer, wanted to create woman he found that he had exhausted his materials in the making of man and no solid elements were left. In this dilemma, after profound meditation, he did as follows. He took the rotundity of the moon, the curves of the creepers, the clinging of tendrils, the trembling of grass, the slenderness of the reed, the bloom of flowers, the lightness of leaves, the tapering of the elephant's trunk, the glance of deer, clustering of rows of bees, the joyous gaiety of sunbeams, the weeping of clouds, the fickleness of the winds, the timidity of the hare, the vanity of the peacock, the softness of the parrot's bosom, the hardness of adamant, the sweetness of honey, the cruelty of the tiger, the warm glow of fire, the coldness of snow, the chattering of jays, the cooing of the kokila, the hypocrisy of the crane, the fidelity of the cakravāka; compounding all these together he made woman and gave her to man.[1]

An important concept that emerges from this account is the correspondence between the form and the feeling, the sensuality and spirituality of the woman and the inter-connection with her world on the one hand and the universe of the blossoms and the birds around her. Individuality which is so much a feature of modernity is notably absent and instead a universality and an organic wholeness is stressed. Our vision of the beautiful is anthropomorphic but not homocentric. While we invest the human body and mind with beauty we recognise that the world does not revolve around mankind alone but it is a plural and multi-centric world. The rasa that animates the nāyikā is the same that animates the world around her and therefore we invest the natural world not only with gracious form but with subtle feelings. As Mulk Raj Anand wrote, "the Hindus believe that there is superior grace of form in the animal and vegetable world than among human beings". On the form of the sensual woman he further writes:

> the face is like the moon, the forehead like the bow, the eyebrows like the leaves of a neem tree that flutter in the wind, the eyes like that of a doe or a fish, the nose like the sesame flower, the lips like the bimba fruit, the chin like the mango stone, the neck modelled on the conch shell, the waist slender

like the wasp, the forearms take the form of young plantain tree, fingers modelled on pea pods, the hands likened to a lotus.[2]

Keśavadāsa in his Rasikapriyā describes the nāyikā thus, once again emphasising the correspondence between the nāyikā and the world around her.

He compares her face with the moon, her eyes with bee-attracting lotuses, her teeth with pomegranates, her breasts with quinces, her lips with coral, her eyes with ruddy goose, her neck with the dove, her hair braid with the snake, her graceful walk with the elephant, her slim waist with the lion, her voice with cuckoo, her nose with the parrot.[3]

The woman is thus the perfect embodiment of prakṛti, and prakṛti in the Indian tradition and in many of its philosophical systems is not just primal and inert matter but imbued with delicate feelings not different from that of the nāyikā. Prakṛti is the embodiment of sensuality, the womb of growth and fecundity and the source of pulsating and throbbing life. The creeper that clings to the tree trunk, the blossoms of spring that evoke a certain joyousness as they herald the advent of spring and the season of love, the branches of a tree that caress the nāyikā as if to protect her, the waves of the Yamunā that become one with gopīs in their jalakrīḍā, the kadamba tree that resonates with the sounds of the flute, pairs of birds that share the romantic dalliance of Rādhā in Vrindavana, the peacock that shares the pain of the Kakubha rāginī, the deer that listens to the music of the virahiṇī Toḍī rāginī, the rain for which the peacock waits with expectation and which the gopīs celebrate in rāginī Megh Malhāra, the cātaka who waits for the drop of rain under the svāti nakṣatra, and the cakravāka who cries for his mate on the banks of the Gaṅgā at dusk, are some of the many examples from the Indian aesthetic tradition that prakṛti is not just inert and inconscient, and that it does not just have a form but a vibrant and pulsating feeling as well, and that this feeling resonates with that of the nāyikā. In celebrating the śṛṅgāra rasa nāyikā we are therefore evoking prakṛti as the source and sustainer of all that is beautiful. The first canto of Jayadeva's Gītagovinda is one of the most beautiful examples of the evocation of śṛṅgāra rasa in the sounds and the smells, the hues and the whispers, the touch and the textures of verdant nature at the time of spring for this is the season of love and that love cannot be separated from the joyous world of charged sensuality all around :

when the tender Malayan wind touches the lovely clove creeper
when the cluster of bakula trees are covered with blossoms and are full of swarms of bees
when the tamāla tree garlanded with fresh leaves is overcome by passion of musk

when the kiṁśuka flowers has the marks of nails of Kāma
when the kesara flower has the appearance of the parasol of Kāma
when young karuna trees laugh at the sight of people whose modesty has vanished
when mādhavikā flowers produces infatuation even in the minds of sages
when the mango delights and closes its buds in the embrace of the trembling atimukta creeper
where the wind which is like the breath of Kāma and carries the fragrance of ketakī

Gītagovinda,[4] I. 28-35.

This association between prakṛti and the woman is carried further when it comes to the depiction of woman as the source of fertility and fecundity as when poets talk of longing of the aśoka tree for the touch of the left foot of the śālabhañjikā as it comes into bloom. The tree longs for the touch of the sensuous woman as much as the nāyikā longs to be in the company of the tree. The image of the śālabhañjikā is commonly represented in temples and on the stūpa and associates the fertility of the woman with the divine and auspicious. It is an accepted practice in the Hindu tradition that sensuous women or surasundaraīs are depicted on temple walls and they are said to impart a certain auspiciousness to it, once again underpinning that what is sensual is not only beautiful but equally important in conferring grace and elevating the mind. Sensuality is repeatedly affirmed and not negated and it forms the foundation of the beautiful.

The quotation describing the creation of a beautiful woman is an ideal starting point of our aesthetic inquiry, for not only has the śṛṅgāra rasa nāyikā been richly celebrated in an unbroken tradition over millennia of our various arts, but in coming to terms with her evocative beauty we are easily led to an understanding of the Indian mind, its ideals and visions, its concepts of the sacred and the secular, its sense of history and world view, all of which are markers of what is beautiful for us in the Indian tradition. The nāyikā as our sūtradhāra will, as it were, hold up a mirror to us, as she does during her adornment, to reassure her of her own beauty, and the mirror in turn will reflect back to us and illuminate for us our concepts of the beautiful of the tradition.

The nāyikā with the mirror, as she adorns herself, is an arresting and a charged image, not only strikingly beautiful at its sensual level but leading us to the serenity of beauty, resonating with her throbbing sensuality but equally pointing incessantly to the super-sensuous. Surrounded by her sakhīs and her paraphernalia of unguents and perfumes, bottles and containers, she is aware of her own beauty and self-assured of her sensuality and seeks confirmation of that in the mirror. But her śṛṅgāra (śṛṅgāra in the bhāṣās) or adornment is neither narcissistic, not just an expression of vanity, but is a dedication, an offering, for as she adorns herself for a romantic tryst and as she makes a final check of her beauty and she looks longingly at the mirror one more time,

this time not so much at her own self but to catch a glimpse of her beloved, for ultimately her adornment is an offering to him, it is for his eyes that she has adorned herself and when their eyes meet and as she detects that delight in his eye, she feels fulfilled. Adornment in the Indian tradition is thus not mere self-glorification or merely decorative. In the very word śṛṅgāra are found suggestions of the many nuances of meaning within it, for śṛṅgāra is adornment and also romance and equally bhakti or devotion or an offering. In being polyvalent and nuanced śṛṅgāra gives us a vision of the importance of the beautiful. We in India adorn with a passion but all our adornments have a purpose, a dedication, a meaning, whether it is in our homes or own bodies, our havelīs or temples. Adornment in and through our arts is a metaphor and equally a visual prayer, the nāyikā adorns herself for the delight of the beloved, the housewife adorns the threshold of her home to sanctify it and seek divine blessings and even the truck driver adorns his vehicle with motifs of fortune and prosperity such as the kalaśa. Adornment is beautification but it is equally a statement of a world view where the beautiful is cherished as a value.

The grammar of adornment is made up not only by the motifs and metaphors like the kalaśa and Viṣṇupāda, the svastika and the mango, the sun and the moon, but equally important in adornment are the various colours which evoke distinctive feelings. Robust, charged and evocative colours are an important part of our sense of beauty, and colours therefore form an important part of the image of the nāyikā. Red is the colour of vermillion and denotes fertility and passion, the pangs of longing and the pleasure of belonging and is a significant statement of the nāyikā's feelings. Blue is the colour of the sky and the ocean and therefore of Viṣṇu, and the blue black of the clouds of Aṣāḍha is the colour of Kṛṣṇa who is the prototypical romantic hero and to whom all love is directed. Yellow is the colour of mango blossoms and of young blossoming love and of the coy nāyikā becoming aware of her own sensuality. Black is the colour of the night, of Kālī and also of the abhisārikā nāyikā as she boldly goes in search of her beloved disregarding ghosts and goblins, snakes and thunder that she meets on the way. Geruā is the colour of the earth but also of ascetics and of the detachment of the nāyikā when śṛṅgāra has transformed itself into bhakti śṛṅgāra. Thus colour for us is not only decorative but conjures up feelings and emotions, it is a non-verbal language, in its silent hues there are evocations and suggestions which leads the sensitive rasika to realms far beyond words. The miniature artist uses these colours not only in the depiction of the nāyikā and her clothes but equally in providing backgrounds to her environment. It is this latter that is most suggestive of the moods of the nāyikā.

Tied as the Indian mind is to the world of nature it chooses vegetative, rather than geometrical or abstract motifs, in the various adornments. The tree and the

creeper, the flower and the blossom the river and the rain with which the nāyikā associates in various romantic pains or pleasures become motifs of adornment. She is mṛṇmayī, a product of the earth, and to it she remains tied, and it is to it she returns for rest and refuge, she never forgets that it is from the womb of the earth that she has arisen and it is in a handful of earth that she hears the footfalls of the countless love stories of the land and it is the earth and its manifestations that gives form to our vision and feelings and creates and sustains the beautiful.

The śṛṅgāra rasa nāyikā pulsates to the same rhythm as that of the seasons and in so doing points to the inherent rhythm or chanda of the universe and which is a feature of what we consider beautiful. There is a certain beat and harmony in the universe of mankind and nature, of body and mind, of the seasons and feelings. This is seen very vividly in the bārahamāsa songs and paintings where the fear of viraha of the nāyikā is tied to the pleasures of the seasons. The changing seasons do not just usher in different landscapes and varying colours but equally along with it the different hues of the mind. To be beautiful is to be in consonance with the seasons and in resonance with its heart throbs.

The living, spiritual connection between the nāyikā and nīsarga, the romantic heroine and the natural world around her is strikingly seen in the portrayal of the virahiṇi nāyikā or the lovelorn heroine in the various Rāgamālā paintings. The Kakubha rāginī seeks the company of peacocks, the Gauri ragini wanders through the forest with branches of the Kalpavṛkṣa, the Baṅgālī rāginī shares her pain with an ascetic, the Guṇakalī rāginī holds a closed lotus, the Pūriyādhanāśrī rāginī in her loneliness draws a portrait of her beloved, the Toḍī rāginī plays the vīṇā to the deer, the Āsāvarī rāginī spends her time in the company of snakes, the Khambāvatī rāginī tries to forget her pain by sharing music with her sakhīs, the Madhumādhavī rāginī feeds the peacocks, Śrī rāginī looks heavenward to seek divine blessings to lessen her pain and the Gurjarī rāginī vents her feelings by playing the vīṇā. The virahiṇī nāyikā thus seeks comfort from the world of trees and the birds around her, she entrusts her deepest feelings to them for the rasa that flows through her is no different from the sap that animates them, for there is between them a living bond so that in their company she feels secure and we as rasikas are chastened by this loving, living relationship and it brings home a fundamental value of the Indian aesthetic tradition, namely of the oneness of man and nature. The nāyikā in the Rāgamālā paintings shows the inter-connection between emotional states on the one hand and painting and music on the other pointing in its own unique way that it is the silken thread of beautiful artistic representations that holds all of this together in one tapestry.

If colours of the nāyikā speak to us in the Indian tradition the environment and ambience of the nāyikā, whether it is the enchanted forest or the opulence of the

havelī, resonates and reacts with her inner being and establishes a living connection between the two. Early in the tradition the Tamil Aham poets codified the rules of matching the landscape to the nāyikā's situation but it is in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and then in the Gītagovinda that we see how beautifully the environment mirrors the mood of the śṛṅgāra rasa nāyikā. The enchanted Vrindavana with its birds and the bees, blossoms and trees is not just a forest but a landscape of the mind of the gopīs. When Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa share amorous pleasures the forest is equally animated with pairs of birds romantically together, on branches laden with blossoms, which caress the nāyikā, where the radiant glow of the sun and the soft light of the moon are witness to their love and illuminate the environment, where the meandering Yamunā beckons, the scented wind whispers a love song and the verdant foliage is alive with feeling, the bees as they gather pollen leave messages, for the sap that flows through all this throbs with the same delight with that of the śṛṅgāra rasa of the nāyikā. When the nāyikā is in a state of viraha or longing the trees and the blossoms are joyless and also bereft of life and there is a certain poignancy about them, she clings to its branches as if to draw comfort from them and she shares her pangs of loneliness with peacocks and deer who seem to understand her pain of separation. The landscape enhances and suggests the rasa of the nāyikā whether it is samyoga or viyoga and in so doing emphasises the living, pulsating relation between the psyche of the nāyikā and the world of nature around her. In pleasure and pathos, longing and belonging she is not alone, for in the web of life for us in the Indian tradition everyone is connected, and the intensely passionate nāyikā belongs to the world around her as much as that animated throbbing world is part of her. This holistic and integral view of the world, where the mind and matter, nāyikā and nisarga are a mirror image of one to the other, is an important aesthetic value of the Indian tradition and pervades our concept of what we consider beautiful. It is for this reason that still life, which is a part of Western art, is never a feature of the concept of the beautiful for us in India. Not a single flower but a creeper with flowers, not just one leaf but the entire tree, not just a portrait of the nāyikā but the nāyikā who is a part of the world around her, are fit subjects for artistic representations. For us the potter is a poet of the earth, the weaver a painter of the world around him, the dancer dances to the rhythms of the universe around her, a musician discovers not creates rāgas just as the nāyikā lives in resonance with creation. The world around us inspires, almost directs us, in our artistic creations and our arts in turn take us back to that world of nature. The two for us are indivisible.

That interconnection of mankind and nature, of puruṣa and prakṛti is brought out by this cryptic verse from the Kaṭha Upaniṣad:

Know thou the ātman as riding in a chariot
The body is the chariot
The buddhi is the chariot driver

And the manas are the reins
The indriya are the horses
The self combined with senses and mind
Wise men call the enjoyer.

Kaṭha Upaniṣad 3.3-4

The spirit of mankind on the one hand and the universe as understood and revealed through the senses on the other are intimately and immediately tied to each other and both participate in the same essence of being. This is the quintessence of Indian thought and is vividly brought out by the śṛṅgāra rasa nāyikā as she seeks and consorts with her beloved.

The sacred and the secular or the sensuous and the spiritual are not two polarities of the human condition but for us in the Indian tradition they are a continuum and the śṛṅgāra rasa nāyikā demonstrates this in her own unique way. While saṁyoga, or love in union, provides amorous pleasures and romantic dalliances, it is the virahiṇi nāyikā, suffering as she does from pangs of separation, who elevates her feelings of love to that of devotion, it is in viraha that her loves moves from sensuality to spirituality, it is the absent Kṛṣṇa that chastens the gopīs to sing, in Suradas's words madhukara śyāma hamāre cora, for it is their minds that Kṛṣṇa has stolen. The virahiṇi nāyikā not only illustrates the pathos and poignancy of love but brings some significant metaphysical principles to light. It is in yearning that love ascends to greater heights, it is in the fire of separation that real love is illuminated, it is in longing that the mind moves from dvaita to advaita and thus finds the ātman. In entrusting the śṛṅgāra rasa tradition to Kṛṣṇa and the gopīs in the Bhagavata and to Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā in later poetry, the Indian poet and artist bring the continuum of the sacred and the secular beautifully to life, for Kṛṣṇa is both sacred and secular at the same time, a flute playing cowherd dallying with the gopīs and the godhead himself with his numerous līlās or cosmic acts such as lifting the mountain or subduing Kāliya, opening his mouth only to show his mother the entire world within it and surprising Akrūra by appearing in the Yamunā and countless other episodes in the Bhāgavata. This concept of immanence and transcendence is termed bheda-abheda in Vaiṣṇava parlance. A Nāthadwārā painting of Śrīnāthjī illustrates this beautifully with the gopīs in the upper register worshipping the iconic Kṛṣṇa and in the lower register engaging in the romantic dāna līlā with the cowherd Kṛṣṇa. The concept of the indivisibility of the sacred and the secular, sometimes also called sacralisation, which underpins Indian aesthetic thought is carried into a number of artistic creations. The kalaśa is not only the container of water for daily use but it is the very embodiment of the various gods, an oil lamp with a snake's hood and the linga within it is not only just a lamp but an expression of the presence of Śiva and Pārvatī in that ritual lamp, the śāligrāma is not

just a stone from the Gaṇḍakī river but has the very presence of Viṣṇu within it in the form of a fossil in the shape of a cakra, a household grater in the shape of a tortoise is a reminder of the kūrma avatāra of Viṣṇu, the vermillion on the forehead is not just an adornment but a representation of divinity, a toilet box with the Gaṇeśa motif is both a container for a nāyikā's cosmetics and a reminder of Gaṇeśa. The tradition is replete with many such examples.

Another important artistic attribute is the way in which the Indian artist handles the romantic persona of the nāyikā through the matrix of time and space. Time and space define saṁsāra and the human condition within it but it cannot touch the beautiful mind of the nāyikā and ultimately it is the nāyikā's mind that we want to celebrate through artistic representations. The world of the nāyikā is not only her involvement with her beloved but equally with that of her surroundings and the two for her are inseparable. However, even more it is her mind which is the abode of śṛṅgāra rasa. While her physical body must function within what Eliade would call "profane" time, which is the real world and all its limitations and restrictions that it imposes, her mind obeys no such limitations. But such is the power of her love that in her psyche she transcends those limitations and reality of the real world to live in another, more beautiful reality of love. Her imagination is so charged that she can be at two places at the same time, she is so driven by her love that mundane realities are immaterial, her love gives her the strength to disregard social sanctions and cross various barriers and it is her love that transforms her into a magical and charmed world of her own, where she creates her own time and space, and it is this other reality that the artist translates in his artistic creations. The beautiful takes us away from the limitations and fragmentation of the material world to a world which is vast and boundless. Through the technique of continuous narration that artist, even within the confines of a two dimensional space, is able to show movement and we can see the same nāyikā at two different places. Even more importantly the Indian artist disregards the realistic demands of space. The rationalistic three point perspective, so important to Mughal and Western artists, is of little concern to the Indian artist. He instead opts for a non-rational perspective, where the eye takes in different views at the same time, an aerial perspective is thus juxtaposed with a lateral view, things distant look near, horizontal dimensions are converted into vertical views, small objects may look bigger and so on. For the mind of the nāyikā quickening to love and romance does not have to obey dictates of rationality for her love defies reason and the beautiful must stay above and beyond the merely rational. This non-rational perspective not only produces an animated and striking picture, alive with throbbing emotions, but even more points to the arationality of the nāyikā's feelings. In her surcharged emotions the nāyikā has not let herself been imprisoned by walls of space

and barriers of time for these are the demands of a rational world. Such is the strength and power of her love, and we who enter her private world through the painting, are led into experiencing that by the Indian artist who uses imaginative and non-rational techniques. Arationality, not irrationality, is the quintessence of the Indian mind for which time is circular and not linear, and space too beautiful to be governed by physical laws and measurements. That arational Indian mind is at home in the realm of myth which is the perfect expression of the Indian sense of the divine and therefore of the beautiful. Our gods and goddesses are essentially mythic beings and it is their mythic acts that we celebrate in our religion and the arts. Myth rather than history, idealised rather than photographic representation, poetic and lyrical rather then prosaic and rational sum up the nāyikā, and this in turn points to the Indian concept of sundara or the beautiful. The beautiful, as epitomised by the śṛṅgāra rasa nāyikā is directed to an end beyond itself.

With the establishment of the Rajput courts and the advent of Rītikāla or the period of mannered poetry especially in the bhāṣās, notable of which are the Rasikapriyā and Satsaī, the nāyikā moves from the sylvan and idyllic forest to the sophistication and ceremony, grace and elegance of courts and havelīs. Whether it is a one room havelī that is seen in the Caurapañcāśikā paintings or the pre-Mughal painting of Malwa and Bundelkhand or the grand courtly scenes of the post-Mughal Rajput period, the nāyikā has a self assured presence in these surroundings. This was the prelude to the flourishing of the courtly arts but already the adornment and ornamentation that was to form an important part of that art is seen clearly. The colourful clothes, the decorated room, well appointed furnishings, the paraphernalia of romantic pleasures like the flasks of wine and the containers for condiments are an important part of the ethos of śṛṅgāra rasa in these paintings and speak of an elegant ambience in which the romantic dalliance was to take place. The innate Indian sensibility of sensual celebration and elegance of life style is seen very clearly both in the poetry and the paintings that grew out of it and underscores the place of the nāgarika or the urban elite as a rasika or a connoisseur of the beautiful and the graceful. The Kāmasūtra gives a pivotal place not only to the courtesan but equally to the nāgarika who is a cultured and cultivated person and for whom the pursuit of the sensual and the beautiful is a treasured value, not just a past time. Indian aesthetic sensibility takes in both the hermit and the king, idyllic pastoral settings and regal opulence, however the primacy and reality of emotion is never lost sight of and if the idyllic Vrindavana reflected the throbbing emotions of the gopīs the one room havelī of the 17th and 18th century Rajput paintings no less resonated with the passion and desire of the nāyikā. Regal opulence and courtly sophistication, the cultured ambience of the cultivated nobility, the grace and elegance of the leisured connoisseurs and the

animated conversation of the adept and the initiate are all a part of the ethos of the celebration of the beautiful and this was to remain a part of the Indian aesthetic tradition well into the 19th century. If the sylvan and idyllic Vridavana was the perfect locale of the unfolding of love of the gopīs and the enchanted forest the ideal location for the dalliance of Radhā and Kṛṣṇa the Rajput courts were no less in fostering the elegance and splendour of śṛṅgāra rasa. The king is considered the earthly representation of divinity and the court a reflection of the temple and once again the sacred and the secular mingle into a seamless whole and the nāyikā is central to both. In the temple it is the devadāsī, the dancer who is he intermediary between the devotee and the deity and in the court the dancer and the musician is the cynosure of attention. In both cases the sensuality of the nāyikā becomes the conduit of aesthetic sensibility, directed towards bhakti or religious devotion in the temple and krīḍā or aesthetic pleasure in the court and it she who defines and represents the beautiful.

With the advent of the Mughals a new phase in Indian aesthetic sensibility was to set in. The door was now open to Persian and European artistic influences to interact with native Indian artistic sensibilities and the preference of Akbar and Jehangir were to mould the Indian taste. Historicity, naturalism and realism were the hall marks of Mughal art and the nāyikā was to become subdued and restrained, distant and statuesque, to be seen and not felt and that too only in the harem or through a jharokhā. Mughal refinement in artistic skills was to temper the free and feisty nāyikā as she became a prisoner of the harem. However, the Indian penchant and spirit was not lost as the Rajput courts, although beholden politically to the Mughals, once again expressed śṛṅgāra rasa with the same gusto that one had seen in early Western and Central Indian paintings. Another important development in the Rajput courts, whether in Rajasthan or the Pahari regions, was how Vaiṣṇavism was woven into śṛṅgāra rasa and once again showed that for the Indian mind the sacred and the secular were one continuum. Kṛṣṇa was not only the divine godhead but equally the romantic hero and this created the beautiful aesthetic tension between the sacred and the secular, a tension that only heightened the aesthetic pleasure. It is difficult to tell where śṛṅgāra ends and bhakti begins as the two are joined in a seamless whole. This is the special contribution of puṣṭimārgī Vaiṣṇavism to the artistic representation of śṛṅgāra rasa and is seen strikingly in the Nāthadwārā and Kishangarh ateliers. The concurrent depiction of Kṛṣṇa as Śrināthajī and Kṛṣṇa performing the dānalīlā in pichawaīs and the transformation of Bani-Ṭhani into Rādhā are two examples, out of many that can be cited.

When the late 18th and the 19th centuries saw the rise of the Pahari ateliers once again a certain lyricism was brought back into śṛṅgāra rasa as one sees in the beautiful Kangra paintings of the Bhāgavata and Gītagovinda. Rādhā mingles with the birds and

the bees, the Yamunā and the Kadamba and the lyrical nāyikā once again captures our attention leading us inwards to the feeling behind the form, a feeling so tender that the nāyikā becomes visual poetry and her rasa an audible song, where the unhurried grace of living mirrors the serenity and delicacy of emotion, where the beautiful nāyikā has a charmed presence and where she blends seamlessly into the idyllic Pahari environment, where her graceful movements are carried by the gentle winds and her soft gaze speaks of treasured moments of love. In Pahari paintings "the resources of art were exploited not for descriptive realism but for producing a poetic trance...elsewhere in India painting had developed the expressive qualities of line and colour but nowhere outside the Punjab Himalayas were there achieved such exquisite renderings of the subtle ecstasies of romance."[5]

In 19th century India one needs to take note of two artistic traditions, which took different paths, but which in their own way define the Indian aesthetic sensibility and they are the Madhubani and the Kalighat styles of painting. Preserved by the women of Mithila in northern Bihar the art of Madhubani retains the innate rustic and sensuous ethos of Rādhā as seen in their creations whether it was in the murals of the Kohabar Ghar or on paper. The Mithila women express themselves with the same passion and arationality of the Malwa artist, where the parrot and the peacock claims equal space as humans, where bright colours express colourful sentiments and primitive shapes speak of ancient feelings of love. The unspoilt and untutored minds of these Mithila women are able to carry timeless streams of the oral tradition passed on from mother to daughter and are able to keep myth alive and create movingly beautiful paintings. The Kalighat artists, however found themselves in an urban ambience where history was replacing myth and the European coloniser was making inroads into the Indian psyche and created the courtesan who catered to the bhadraloka, the middle class of Bengal. In addition they satirised love and found a place in their artistic representations for romantic scandals like the Elokeshi episode. With this the door was now opened to Indian modernity and the emergence of whole new aesthetic sensibility.

While the nāyikā has given us a glimpse of the Indian aesthetic tradition, its values and concepts, it would be doing the craft or the popular tradition a disservice if we did not mention it at least in passing as it in its own unique way says something about our concept of the beautiful. The Indian concept of beauty was different in the folk as distinguished from the classical tradition. For the folk artist or craftsman, utility was the primary concern. Object of daily use like cooking utensils or betel nut boxes and crackers, toilet box, ink pot and even foot scrubbers had to be beautifully made. These objects of everyday use were objects they lived with and it was important they were well made and lovingly used as it added a certain grace to their

life. The mud walls of their homes and huts further provided an outlet for their creative urges. These they decorated with a variety of designs and motifs. The motifs of these simple folk artists were based on vegetative and animal themes such as birds and animals, plants and creepers. But under the facade of these simple designs lay a world view uniquely their own. Fertility was important to these rural people as they were mainly agricultural and they expressed it with motifs such as two birds sitting together or flowers blooming from plants and trees. Even in their choice of colours, red was their favourite colour, these artists showed their preoccupation with fertility. Adornment was another feature of folk art for whether it was their threshold or their own bodies they adorned with a flourish. While folk art was not meant for aesthetic contemplation it was an expression and celebration of beauty.

It is clear that the traditional nāyikā in the classical tradition, which is the focus of our attention, not only has a rūpa or outer form but a rasa or an inner content, and it is this coming together of the rūpa and the rasa that constitutes the beautiful for us in India in traditional aesthetic discourse. It is the rasa, understood as feelings and emotions, the manas and the hṛdaya of the nāyikā, that enriches and enlivens, animates and energises the rūpa. Rūpa is not just an inert form but one that throbs with life, a rasa, a prāṇa. Rasa then is the defining feature of beauty, shared equally by the nāyikā and the world around is the thread which has held the various artistic representations together. It was Viśwanātha who summed up the Indian position on rasa when he said:

vākyam rasātmakam kāvyam
(It is rasa that converts a sentence into poetry).

In positing rasa as the defining feature of what is beautiful the tradition emphasises the inner essence more than the outer form, the sap that flows through things animate, reminding us that like the sap, what is objectively beautiful or sundara must flow and lead to the subjective experience of beauty or saundarya. In celebrating rasa it is the creative principle both in the artist as the creator and the rasika as the re-creator that we are recognising,

The romantic nāyikā of the Indian tradition as represented in the arts, and especially in miniature paintings, rings true to what Havell has said about the Indian artist:

> The true aim of the (Indian) artist is not to extract beauty from nature but to reveal Life within life, the Noumenon within phenomenon, the Reality within unreality and the Soul within matter.[6]

That inner reality of the nāyikā is her selfless love, joyous and exuberant in amorous moments of saṁyoga or togetherness, steadfast and devoted even in viyoga

or separation, a love so intense that it is difficult to know when śṛṅgāra ends and bhakti begins. The movement and transcendence from the immediate to the ultimate, from sensual to spiritual, from jīvātman to parātman is a constant refrain in the love of the śṛṅgāra rasa nāyikā and in Indian thought and art. To incorporate this in artistic manifestations is the metier of the artist, to recognise this in those artistic representations is the skill of the rasika. This is the quintessence of what we consider beautiful and in the words of Havell, once again:

> Beauty is subjective, not objective. It is not inherent in form or matter; it belongs only to spirit, and can only be apprehended by spiritual vision.[7]

The thrust of the Hindu concept of beauty is to capture the formless and move away from the form, to go from the outer to the inner, to reach the universal from the particular, to touch the spiritual even while affirming the sensuous. In this sense the beautiful is best expressed as a metaphor. In suggesting rather than expressing it makes the appreciation of the beautiful a dynamic and creative process and not a passive and voyeuristic activity. The rasika is not a mere onlooker but a participant. Since the nāyikā is the paradigm of the jīvātman questing for the parātman, the mind of the rasika as it behold what is beautiful is chastened and quickened and starts its own journey exploring newer and wider vistas of meaning, enriching the experience by taking it in different directions through time both present and past there by making that beautiful nāyikā transcend time and space, move away from the immediate and touch the ultimate. For to behold the beautiful is a pleasure but to experience beauty is bliss.

We began with a search of what is beautiful for us in the Indian tradition and as we discovered the beautiful nāyikā and contemplated her outer form and were led to her inner content we found that

in depicting the beautiful
a motif is not just adornment but a metaphor
and sensuality is the first step toward spirituality
what is seen is important but what is unseen is even more so
where the rasa that flows through the nāyikā is no different from the sap that animates the blossoms and the birds
where our dance is not just movement but it captures the rhythm of the universe
and our gestures are not just signs but say what words are too weak to convey
where śṛṅgāra expresses beautifully what it is to be human
but when śṛṅgāra merges into bhakti we transcend our humanity
where to become is a celebration of what is beautiful
but to be is to rest in the serenity of beauty
and it is in that serenity of beauty that we find ourselves.

We began our aesthetic journey with a quest of the nāyikā of śṛṅgāra rasa and in finding her we were led to an understanding of her relationship with prakṛti, her concepts of space and time, the transformation of her viraha into bhakti and the evolution of śṛṅgāra rasa into bhakti śṛṅgāra, and as were touched by all this we discovered our own selves.

References

1. E.B. Havell, The Ideals of Indian Art, London, John Murray, 1911. p. 91.
2. Ibid, p. 82.
3. Andrew Topsfield, Court Paintings of Udaipur, Zurich, Artibus Asiae Publishers, P. 67
4. Lee Siegel., Sacred and Profane Dimension of Love in Indian Traditions as exemplified in the Gita Govinda of Jayadeva, Delhi, Oxford Univesity Press. P. 245
5. W.G. Archer, Indian Painting in the Punjab Hills, London, His Majesty's Stationer Office, 1952, P.5.
6. E.B. Havell. P. 24
7. Ibid., p. 23.

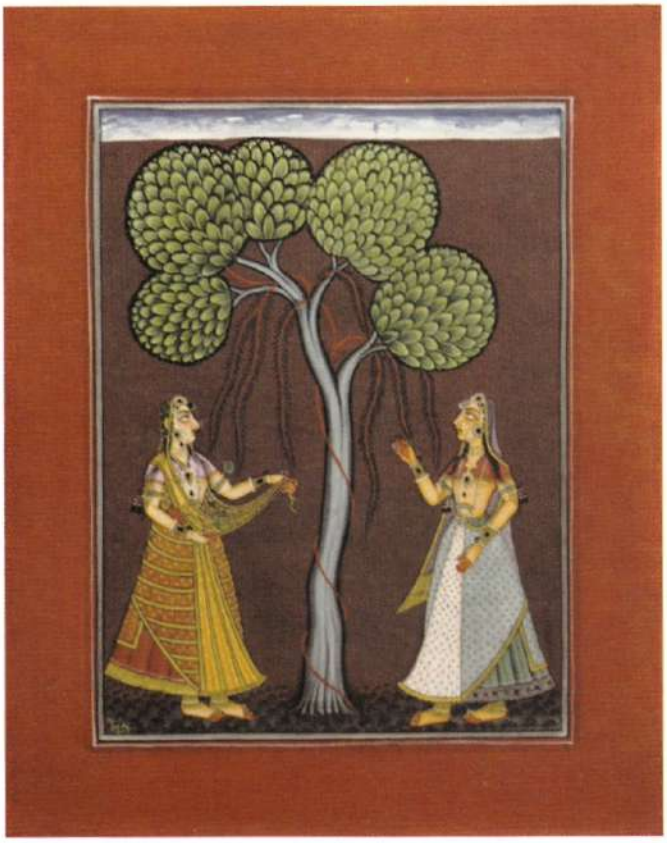
* As illustrations are not referred in the text, they appear as visual aid at the end - Editors.

Banī-Ṭhanī

Rādhā Madhubani

Virahiṇī Nāyikā

Surasundarī



Women and the Tree