ESSAY

ART

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TOWARDS THE TEMPLE

A poor student of the Bombay School of Art named Khaje has fashioned a female figure in Paris-plaster, to which he has given the name To the Temple. Around this small matter, a curious little duel has broken out in the English press.

Two photographs of this figure were sent to Sir George Birdwood. Upon viewing the photographs, he wrote, in his art journal The Journal of Indian Art and Industries, an enthusiastic and unreserved review, in which he acknowledged the figure as comparable to the celebrated sculptures of ancient Greece. It may be that the warm-hearted Sir Birdwood, carried away by his affection for India and by his vision of the future flowering of Indian art, said somewhat more than was strictly warranted about this figure—but that is not for us to judge.

Unfortunately, however, he made one error. He could not tell from the photograph that the figure had been modelled in plaster; he supposed it to be of stone. Of course, the nobility of the material does affect the relative worth of a work of art, and thus the comparison of a plaster figure with ancient stone sculptures may perhaps not have been entirely fitting.

Seizing upon this small lapse, a certain Anglo-Indian writer published, in the columns of the Pioneer, a sharply sarcastic and venomous letter against Birdwood's review; and thus, over a plaster figure made by a Maharashtrian student, a small and rather absurd bloodletting took place in the arena of the English periodicals, between two English combatants.

We do not pretend that we shall descend into this dispute as impartial arbiters. We are unlettered in these matters, and therefore partial; if we think somewhat more highly of the work of our own young countryman than is warranted, we hope that even the bitterest India-hater nourished on the salt of India will not, on that account, take offence.

On the other hand, we, being as destitute as we are in matters of art, are for the present likely to be satisfied with very little. There is a verse in Sanskrit that runs:

A man of meagre means desires only that his little hoard of grain might somewhat increase; but that same man, once he has grown wealthy, comes to regard even an elephant as but a wisp of straw. Thus there is no absolute standard of greatness or smallness where wealth is concerned; it is the condition of the rich man himself that now magnifies things, now diminishes them.

Such is our own condition. Even should the work of some young and gifted sculptor of ours fall short of the ancient Greek masterpieces, we shall remain content. When our day comes, when we too are in a position to look upon the elephant as a wisp of straw, then our scales for weighing good and bad will themselves grow heavier by that same measure. And so, what seems small to Europe is, for us, quite large enough—for it is ever the condition of the wealthy that makes things now small, now great.

When the paintings of the Madras artist Ravi Varma first came before our eyes, the joy they gave us was, no doubt of a kind that impartial critics of the future may not judge to be warranted by their actual merit. But that joy fell like a fistful of grain upon the empty basket of the famished—and for the present, that fistful of grain outweighs the golden abundance that awaits some fully satisfied person of the future.

What incompleteness there may be in Ravi Varma's paintings, from the standpoint of the art of painting, we shall judge when we are fit to judge it. But the joy we feel at present is not merely the joy of aesthetic enjoyment—it is the joy of hope. We see that, at one corner of India's slumbering heart, an attempt at the creation of beauty is stirring into wakefulness. However imperfect and unfinished it may be, it overwhelms our imagination by its very vastness. Those ages of ancient India whose lamp of history has long since been extinguished, that time when a wondrous artistic endeavor was blossoming itself into immortal, beautiful form amid India's lonely mountain caves and in the stone clusters of her temples—that image-making, that temple-building, that age which touched stone with feeling and gave it life—I wish to see reflected anew upon the horizon of the future.

Those in modern India who, now and again, kindle this light of hope—even if they be not our sun and moon—are yet showing us the way, through the darkened night of our country, toward a future of great glory. Perhaps, in the light of that future, their own small rays of light will one day grow pale; nonetheless, they are blessed.

India today has fallen from the society of the world. She must rise again into that society. That her exchange with the world will once more proceed on equal terms—this hope we cannot in any way abandon. When we shall regain political independence, and whether we shall ever regain it at all, is idle to discuss. But that by our own strength we shall win an independent seat in the empire of the world's genius—this is a hope never to be relinquished.

England, drunk with the pride of imperial expansion, has of late begun to regard the peoples of the tropics as so much cattle belonging to her own herd. All Asia and Africa exist, it seems, to bear their burdens and to yield up their milk—so Kidd and other modern writers have taken as a self-evident truth.

That our degradation today knows no bounds is true; but it is not true that tropical India has forever served as the world's hired labourer. Egypt, Babylon, Chaldea, India, Greece, and Rome—these were the very hands that first kindled civilization's flame, and most of them lay within the tropics, under the dominion of the burning sun. How that ancient wheel of time shall once more turn back to the eastern horizon of the world, it is impossible to determine by statistics and argument, for the rise and fall of great nations occurs according to the strange dispensation of destiny, which no chain of logic can wholly measure; the smallest error in its compass, over vast reaches of time, grows and grows until it strays far indeed from the truth.

In this connection, such digressive thoughts rise unbidden out of the heart's own vexation. For when we see famished Europe, sitting comfortably at home, marking out the whole of the tropical belt with chalk to divide amongst herself, we come to suspect ourselves entirely lifeless matter, and despair and self-contempt threaten to overwhelm our hearts.

At just such a moment, an example such as that of Jagadish Bose shows us once again the path of hope. How far Jagadish Bose has advanced the flame of science into the mysteries of the universe, most of us do not properly know, nor have we the capacity to know; but that, through this achievement, hope and the enthusiasm of pride have considerably increased our strength—of this there can be no doubt.

When some foreign critic, ripe in judgment, freely and openly praises, upon seeing Khaje's sculpture, however ignorant we may be in matters of art, our whole heart, at the pulse of hope, seems to leap into flame.

The art of painting and sculpture has this great advantage: their language is universally understood. Of course, to grasp their finer qualities truly requires much learning and practice. But to apprehend them in their simplest form requires no particular barrier to be crossed. For this reason, art can come, without any need of introduction, and stand before the whole assembly of the world. If today a sculptor of true genius should arise among us, tomorrow he could reveal himself before the entire world.

Therefore, if India can bring her genius to flower in the arts, a gateway to the palace of the world stands ready to open swiftly before her.

It is a saying much repeated: "In one's own land the king is honoured; the learned man is honoured everywhere." Learning that possesses this quality of universality and timelessness earns for the learned man the honour of worship. The painting practised in our country—the folk-drawn scrolls—is provincial; whatever little worth it has exists only within a narrow community. When we succeed in making our art universal, then, having gained a place in the assembly of all mankind, it will extend our very humanity.

An example of this is Bengali literature. Half a century ago, this literature existed only in ballads and folk-songs, provincial in nature. Gifted writers such as Madhusudan Dutt, Bankimchandra, and Hemchandra brought this literature into a universal field. The astonishing transformation that has occurred within twenty-

five or thirty years seems almost miraculous. Now this literature is a chief component of Bengali manhood. Now, through this literature, the Bengali feels the freedom of knowledge, the largeness of imagination, and the expansion of the heart. This literature has instilled in the Bengali heart a love of humanity, a devotion to one's country, and a deep, vast, and restless aspiration. Now, the ideal of good and evil, of beauty and ugliness, that exists within this literature is not provincial—it is universal and eternal.

Yet, unfortunately, the Bengali language remains but the language of a single portion of India. Had this language been the language of all India, and had Bengali literature been able to stand upon the hearts of thirty crores of the people of India, then whatever inevitable narrowness and constraint lies within it would have vanished, and this literature would have grown wonderfully vast in strength, and could have exercised a truly immense power in the world. That Bengali literature has not yet, in every respect, attained the fullness of humanity, powerful individuality, and deep spirituality—the chief reason for this lies in the fact that it exists before only a small number of people. And that small number, though they have gained from their education the broad ideal of European sensibility, have yet been unable truly to assimilate it. They view their own literature narrowly, judging it by the standard of personal caprice and sectarian pettiness. Literature receives ample light and rain from the open sky above, but it cannot gather sufficient nourishment from the soil of society beneath.

For this reason, we do not feel despair. For literature, like a tree, will year by year, age by age, enrich the soil beneath it with its own fallen, ancient leaves.

But though the arts of painting and sculpture are not, like literature, food for the whole of human nature, they have this one advantage: that on the very day they cast off their narrow provincialism and step forward into the open, that very day they belong to the whole world. From that day forward, they need no longer face the scorn of personal vanity or communal ignorance. Drawing sustenance from the heart of the entire world, they may, before our very eyes, transcend the bounds of time and place.

Whether some new poet has today, in the land of Maharashtra, struck some new chord upon the lyre of the human heart, we Bengalis do not know, and even to know it would require considerable learning and effort. But the image of the plaster figure fashioned by a Maratha student named Khaje, we have placed before the Bengali reader in the pages of Pradip; there is no barrier for anyone to understand and appreciate it. The Marathas do not yet know our Bankimchandra as their own Bankimchandra, but if Khaje can bring his genius to full strength, he will very soon become our Khaje as well.

If we attempt to review this sculpture, we shall merely give expression, in some measure, to our emotional outpouring—but that cannot be called criticism. What extraordinary power of mind is required to conceive, from beginning to end, so complete a figure as if actually seen—this lies beyond the comprehension of us ordinary men of different trades. And then, to give that conception form—no part, however small, may be left out, not the tip of a fingernail, not a single curl about the neck—every fold of the drapery, every bend of every finger must be conceived and executed with clarity. There is no room, in the front, back, or sides of the figure, to leave the conception vague or incomplete. And then, taking together limbs, ornaments, drapery, expression, and posture, down to the placement of the hair and the arrangement of the toes—harmonizing all into a wondrous music of the human body, a symmetry of beauty within the imagination, and, out of that, awakening it in inert, unyielding material—this is the sorcery of genius. Left foot with right, garment-fold with body-fold, left hand with right hand, the poise of the head with the whole vine of the body—joining all these together with the most delicate skill is the very rhythm-composition of bodily beauty. The hidden mystery of this composition of rhythm is known only to the genius-endowed sculptor; and in Khaje's sculpture, from among the disposition of limbs, ornaments, drapery, and the light and graceful poise of the figure, that strange yet simple music seems to rise silently and resound upward—just as a pure white blooming night-flower, standing in a gentle sway upon its own upright stem, sends forth, into the star-realm of the silent night sky, a melody of fulfillment.

I said before that in attempting a review, only a degree of emotional outpouring would be expressed—of which no reader can derive any real benefit, we are uncertain.

Regarding the life of the sculptor, Shri Ganpat Kashinath Khaje, the account received in his letter is extremely brief. Brief it must be, for his age is but twenty-two years. He is by caste a Somvamshi Kshatriya. After learning his own tongue, Khaje studied but little English. Feeling an intense longing to learn drawing, he abandoned all other studies and entered the Bombay School of Art. There he passed every examination with distinction and repeatedly won prizes. By exhibiting his sculptures now and again at the Bombay Art Exhibition, Khaje has won numerous silver medals. For creating the sculpture named To the Temple, Khaje received a prize of two hundred rupees from the Maharaja of Baroda; this sculpture was purchased by the Bombay School of Art for twelve hundred rupees and preserved in its gallery. What such a work ought properly to be worth, it is not for us to say, but Khaje himself has called this sum trifling, and no doubt it is indeed but trifling.

The young artist has lamented that in our country the fine arts, sculpture among them, receive no honour. India has much to lament in this regard, and so we can offer him no consolation on this score. When the number of the gifted increases in our country, and the number of the wealthy increases as well, then honour may be extended to talent through wealth in due measure. For now, one must go on with one's work half-fed, half-encouraged, even pierced by the petty barbs of envy from the unworthy and untalented. Where every circumstance is favorable, there is no particular glory in achieving greatness. Even in modern Europe, many a great painter and sculptor has had to labour long amid neglect and hunger; and that very adversity of fortune, like a subdued enemy, has bestowed upon genius gifts more abundant and more precious still.

One or two Parsi gentlemen are assisting Khaje by providing him work. Khaje hopes that Bengal too will not be niggardly in extending such assistance.

Pradip, Poush 1305

ART

A Maharashtrian student bearing the name "Khaje" had created a female figure entitled "One Who Walks the Path to the Temple" (To the Temple). Two photographs of this figure, one frontal and one in profile, were sent to Sir George Birdwood, the eminent authority on Indian art. The proposal was that if this student were given the opportunity to study in Europe, it might prove beneficial.

In reply, the said friend of India, the English gentleman, wrote a letter praising the figure most abundantly. In it he declared that this sculpture might be compared with works produced during the very height of Greek sculptural achievement, and that it would be difficult to find its equal in contemporary European art. In his view, the sculptor who, without any training in European artistic technique, had been able from his own genius to conceive so wondrous a beauty, ought not to be sent for training abroad before the full development of his powers, since through imitation of European art, India's particular grace and particular genius might be overwhelmed and lost.

It must be mentioned here that Mr. Birdwood made two errors. First, he could not tell from the photograph that the figure was not made of stone, but was merely a work of Paris-plaster. Second, Khaje had received his training from a European instructor at the Bombay Art School.

Seizing upon these two errors, a certain Anglo-Indian writing under the name Chisholm poured, in the columns of the Pioneer, malicious ridicule upon Mr. Birdwood—and while grudgingly acknowledging something of the merit of Khaje's sculpture, spared no effort to belittle it.

Our education in matters of art is incomplete. Incomplete is too mild a word; it would not be an exaggeration to call it non-existent. Thus, whether any Indian has the right to enter into this controversy is doubtful. But our hearts have been gladdened by the emergence of this new artist.

Two of the aforementioned photographs have appeared in the journal Journal of Indian Art, edited by Mr. Birdwood. Having examined them repeatedly, we have not found our satisfaction complete. In the woman's raised left arm rests a plate, and her lowered right hand holds a vessel resting against the direction of her upward-facing thigh. Her right knee is set gracefully behind, and the tip of her delicate toes touches the ground. Her divinely beautiful figure, though not concealed beneath a tightly-bound bodice or elaborately draped garment, is covered in an exceedingly graceful manner. The youthful face is the very face of our own India—simple, tender, calm, and touched with a faint sorrow. The whole composition is pure, restrained, and complete.

Gazing upon this image, we feel our long-hungry longing gradually being fulfilled before our very eyes. Suddenly we understand that we have long awaited the sight of an ideal of Indian womanhood given form. That beauty we have inwardly felt as Lakshmi, as Saraswati, as Annapurna, but no gifted artist has ever given it immortal embodiment and set it before our eyes.

Many images of native women are to be found, but these are but natural portraits—that is, likenesses of those who move about daily in home and abroad, who eat and dress, who come and go, who are born and who die. But the woman who is ever wakeful within us and around us, in our literature and our music, who stands eternal and unchanging amid the endless procession of Indian women through the generations, who was young by the banks of the Saraswati in the hermitage groves of Vedic times, and who today, upon the iron-chained banks of the Ganges, is still young in the drawing-room sofa-corners of the new capital—that eternal figure, that embodiment of thought, that India-Woman, who though present at all times throughout India, is never directly visible to us—to make her manifest is the desire of our hearts, the aspiration of our art. Blessed is the artist who, through the power of imagination, can seize hold of that timeless form of the body through sculpture.

Gazing upon the image of Khaje's sculpture, one feels that this is that pure, chaste, devout Hindu woman who has walked, through all ages, upon the path to the temple, and who will forever walk that path—she who is nameless, birthless,

deathless—before her lies some invisible eternal shrine, behind her some invisible eternal household threshold.

That a shadow of Greek artistry falls upon this image cannot be denied. But it has not overwhelmed the native artist's genius; rather, it remains entirely subordinate to it. This cannot properly be called imitation. It might rather be termed assimilation. To take what belongs to another as one's own, to take the foreign as one's native land, to make the old new—this is the very mark of genius.

That this student's artistic sensibility should have been awakened through his education at the English art school gives us no cause for surprise or grievance. Nor is there any reason to conclude from this that his work is therefore essentially European in character.

In the history of English literature, what is called the Shakespearean age arose out of the collision with the wave of feeling then sweeping through Italy. At that time, through contact with foreign lands and peoples, quite a turbulence arose within English literature—much within it was disordered, immature, unrestrained, uncultivated—and it did not take long before it grew graceful, complete, and natural. But that very shock awakened the mind of England, and English genius was able to assimilate many of the outward forms, modes, meters, and ornaments of literary art. English literature suffered no harm from this—it gained in richness.

Our own minds, too, required the shock of some new and powerful current of thought to rouse them from their deep torpor. The vigorous and vital literature and art of the West is delivering that very shock. For the present, not all its fruits can be wholesome and graceful. And at first, mere outward imitation naturally predominates—but gradually, by degrees, the goddess of fortune of India will enter into it, bringing harmony out of discord—and through that foreign flood's deposited silt, she will, with redoubled vigor, cause her own seeds to sprout, her own flowers to bloom, her own fruits to ripen.

This cannot but happen. Our vast India that surrounds us on every side, our ancient and distant India, our deep and hidden inward India—there is no way to restrain her. New learning may blow like a storm, fall like a thunderbolt, pour down like

rain—our India, like the earth herself, receives it—some of it bears fruit, some fails, some even yields poisoned fruit, but amid all these results, India herself endures.

In Bengali literature, we have gained many outward forms and modes from English. Among these, those which are universal and eternal, most suited to the expression of the heart's inward feeling, will remain. We received the form of the novel from English literature, but in the hands of our gifted writers that novel has become wholly a Bengali novel. Suryamukhi is Bengali, Bhramar is Bengali; Kapalkundala, having left the society of home, and having become, even in the depth of feeling, an exile, is no disguised heroine of an English romance—she is a Bengali forest-maiden.

The truth of the matter is this: genius is like a great tree. A newly-planted sapling cannot, by thrusting itself, half-grown, into deep soil, complete its birth and death within a single year, sustained by but one season's rain and one summer's sun. It must send its roots down deep and far before it can draw up the sap and sustenance proper to it. That deep and distant bond can, by its very nature, exist nowhere but in one's native land. However much learning we may gain, our relation to foreign lands touches only our surface—there we have no soil, no rightful claim. But without that deep and natural bond forged across ages and vast distances, great genius can never stand firmly, can never keep itself eternally alive. For this reason, genius naturally extends its roots into the very core of its own homeland, even as it lifts its crown into the universal sky above.

This is not merely the mark of literary genius but of all greatness whatsoever. Mere outward imitation, the trivial pomp of foreign manner and style, even the sweet indulgence of alien luxury and fantasy—these can never bring true satisfaction to a great heart.

Whatever in English society, in English history, is deep, wide, and eternal—however brilliant and eye-catching its imitation abroad may appear—remains, in that imitation, dry, narrow, and disconnected; it lacks the full sustenance and full support of a large heart. For this reason, when we see certain of our Bengalis who, suddenly, from head to foot, become thorny with Anglicized manner, and who go about oppressing everyone around them, we are put in mind of a potted foreign

plant, hanging suspended in mid-air on the master's veranda, nourished by the memsahib's watering-can—having no connection with the soil of its own land, no bond with its native forest—and it is from that very severance that such people's pride, and their perpetually precarious condition, springs. But for one whose sustenance cannot be a mere pinch of exotic fare, the soil of one's own poor homeland, however humble compared to costly and exotic china pots, remains an absolute necessity.

Therefore, even though education may bring redoubled strength and new capacities, true genius will, of its own accord, for the very sake of its life's blood, by the very pull of its own veins, be impelled to gather its nectar from its native land alone.

If Khaje possesses true genius, there is no cause for anxiety on his account—he is bound, in his work, in the unfolding of his genius, to remain Indian to the very end—he has no other course open to him. If he lacks genius, then one more instance of talent gone astray, added to the countless multitude of petty imitators, would occasion, I think, no great additional harm.

But education, and proper education, is necessary. Without complete mastery over one's materials, there is danger in stepping beyond the safe bounds of imitation. One who knows but little swimming cannot venture from the shelter of the shore, but must circle near the bank. Every branch of learning has an outward, technical portion; only by mastering this completely can one render it fit for independent use and for the expression of one's own thought. When the outward rules, techniques, and craftsmanship of the sculptor's art have become, for Khaje, a matter of full possession and effortless ease, then his native genius will gain a vast field for free movement; otherwise, the shadow of borrowed models will fall now and again upon his work, and he will never be able to win freedom from the bondage of imitation.

But Khaje is a poor student. Europe's white-armed goddess of art is calling him to her lap from across the ocean; the boy has heard that call within his own heart and has risen up in boundless eagerness—but he has no means of travel. If some connoisseur among foreigners should come forward to bear the expense of his

European training, it would be a matter of shame for our country; and if neither our own countrymen nor any foreigner should come forward, that indeed would be a matter of the deepest sorrow for our land, without doubt.

A Bengali student named Rukminikanta Nag was, for some time, engaged in the study of art in Italy, gaining considerable fame and advancement. But, struck down by an incurable illness brought on by poverty and privation, all his hopes came to an untimely end in death. For our country, so impoverished in art, this death is as shameful as it is grievous.

Many may not know that a particularly gifted student of the Calcutta Art School named Shashibhushan Hesh is presently engaged in the study of art in Europe. The Maharaja Suryakanta Acharya Chaudhuri of Muktagachha is bearing all his expenses. For this, Bengal owes him gratitude!

Khaje too is entitled to the same opportunity of studying art in Europe—he has proved this through the display of his extraordinary talent. If, at this juncture, the people of our country fulfil their duty, then this boy's blossoming genius shall attain its full flowering, to the glory of the people of our land; the encouraging words of India's friend, Mr. Birdwood, shall be vindicated; and the malice-poisoned contempt of Chisholm and his fellow Anglo-Indians shall stand condemned forever before the eyes of eternity.

Bharati, Ashadh, 1305