

## BOOK REVIEW

**BISWAS, GOUTAM : *ART AS DIALOGUE: ESSAYS IN PHENOMENOLOGY OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE*. New Delhi, Indira Gandhi Centre for the Arts, New Delhi in association with D K Printworld (p) Ltd, New Delhi., 1995.**

Goutam Biswas's *ART AS DIALOGUE* includes six essays in all. These are (1) Introduction, (2) The phenomenology of aesthetic experience, a dialogical perspective, (3) Martin Buber's concept of art as dialogue, (4) Michael Polanyi's aesthetics, a phenomenological study, (5) Personal man and aesthetic truth, a dialogical view of Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of art, and (6) Artistic knowledge, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan's philosophy of art. Biswas's focus in the book is on the phenomenology of aesthetic experience and it is this theme which runs through all the essays and gives them a sort of unity.

Biswas works within the phenomenological tradition of Husserl, Heidegger, and Martin Buber. His objective primarily is epistemological. He sets himself the task of answering questions like 'what is the ontological status of a work of art?' 'how is the meaning of a work of art determined?' 'what is the nature of man's relationship to a work of art?', and 'what is the nature of the creative process?'. He visualized a vantage point from where to throw light on these questions about any philosophy of art. He writes: "But, whatever the individual art form may be, its relationship with the spectator or the artist is a fundamental or universal phenomenon which has its own ontology. Its discovery may not only provide answers to the questions above, but lead us to envision a common platform on which all arts may stand

together." (p.11.). On his view, that fundamental phenomenon is the aesthetic experience and its ontology is discovered in its phenomenological analysis which Biswas undertakes in this book.

Biswas considers aesthetic experience inclusive of the experience of the artist in the process of his creation, the experience of the spectator in appreciation of a work of art, and the experience of the critic in his appraisal of a work of art. He does not feel the need to distinguish these experiences one from the other, although it is possible and I am much inclined to think that these experiences are fundamentally distinct from one another. For instance, the critic's perception in evaluating a work of art need not be identified with the beholder's experience of enjoying a work of art; nor need the artist's creative experience be assimilated to either of these two. I agree with Biswas that underlying each of these different experiences there may be an unformed awareness or experiencing. But then how do we know it? My answer is that we know it and can analyze it psychologically or phenomenologically only as it appears to us and in no other way unless of course we choose not to have our feet firmly on the ground. Similarly, we need to keep different art forms and their distinctive features well in focus in any project of phenomenological inquiry, or else we put ourselves at the risk of falling in the trap of innocuous and vacuous generalizations frustrating the standard purpose of aesthetic inquiry, which is illumination. Biswas looks for that something which is fundamental in aesthetic experience and is common to all the art forms, - poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, dance, drama, and music, and the result of this pursuit may turn out to be conceptually disastrous; instead of greater clarity and sharper perception, we may land ourselves in the swamp of muddles.

Let us see what Goutam Biswas means by a work of art. On his view, a work of art is an "unfinished product" (p.15). He writes: "What I mean by 'never a finished work' is that there is no fixed, fully enclosed or exhausted fully actualized content in the work of art because it essentially admits of appreciation in terms of ever unfolding possibilities of meaning. There is no one particular appreciation of a work, nor can the work's content be exhaustively brought out. The work is an 'unfinished product' in so far as it

is a source of unfinished possibilities for appreciation and interpretation." (p.15). I am afraid Biswas's reasoning here has got mixed up. From the fact that a work of art is a source of unfinished possibilities for appreciation and interpretation what follows is that a work of art admits of several possible interpretations, but it does not follow that a work of art is an unfinished product unless of course we use language metaphorically and mean by "unfinished product" something of which many interpretations are possible. Biswas adds: "From the standpoint of the creator-artist, the work may be a finished product, but even to the artist, let alone to spectators, the work is 'unfinished' in the sense that it assumes an 'open textured' character by becoming an ontologically peculiar entity" (p.15). This too does not help much. Characterizing a work of art as "an ontologically peculiar entity" is not illuminating. It is not much communicative either, it falls short of literally saying that we really do not know how to characterize a work of art significantly.

On Biswas's view, the epistemological significance of a work of art lies in its dialogic character, a transcendence of subject-object dichotomy." (p.22). This is so because a work of art has an experiential as distinguished from discursive dimension such that when one is face to face with a work of art there is in an I-Thou, and not an I-It relationship with it, and further in creating, enjoying, or evaluating a work of art, one is in dialogue with it, a sort of interaction in which there is an openness, reciprocity, and a deep sense of personal involvement between the individual and the artwork. So far so good. But a dialogical relationship has to be reciprocal. This condition, however, appears to be unsatisfiable by the relation of an individual with a work of art. Biswas seems to suggest that this relation satisfies the condition. (p.35). He writes: "The mode of intentionality in aesthetic experience can be characterized as dialogic only, because the intentional acts of consciousness with regard to our aesthetic experience do not emerge from consciousness as a centre or ego, or from the art object alone. These acts flow from the interplay itself- from the dialogue. The concept of dialogue is, therefore methodologically significant for us". (pp.33-34). He adds: I-Thou relation in virtue of its dialogic nature "is relation in its true sense" (p.35). "It is its own

ontology". (p.35). "Knowledge is generated not from any of the units of relation, but from and in the phenomenon of relation itself-from and in the sphere of I-Thou." (p.35). Thus, it is dialogue itself which as a method makes possible a "holistic view of man in terms of the unification of divergent aspects of him "envisioned through an integration of his states of becoming both in I-thou and I-It forms of relationship." (pp. 35-36). Further. "In a dialogical method I know the other as a Thou, and hence grasp directly his capacity for both I-It and I-Thou forms of relationships and knowledge," (p. 36). Saying this is not enough. It does not show the possibility of dialogue between the individual as a creator, enjoyer, or critic, and a work of art, which obviously lacks sentience, speech, and the capacity to reciprocate. Biswas's argument, at best, is persuasive.

A key concept in his theory of art as dialogue is the idea of I-Thou relationship between the individual and a work of art. He insists that this is the idea of an open, reciprocal relationship infused with a deep sense of personal involvement. Thus he speaks of 'Thou orientation' of the individual in relation to a work of art. Can this be a two-way relation? I am afraid it can be had one way only, not two ways, from an individual to a work of art but not conversely. Biswas therefore need not insist that in understanding, enjoying, or creating a work of art the individual's relation to it is dialogical in the sense in which it must be a two way relation. That would be mistaking a metaphorical use of the expression "dialogue" and "dialogical" as literal. Literally, one can be said to have a dialogue with an artist but not with a work of art. A work of art is not characterized by openness, reciprocity and a deep sense of involvement which essentially are personal attributes and which a work of art cannot be said to have.

Following Martin Buber Biswas's locution "Thou orientation" towards a work of art broadly suggests that when we speak of a work of art, if we are operating the framework of I-Thou relationship we take the work of art seriously *as if it were* of an intrinsic interest to us, we treat it *as if it were* an act of God which commands devotion akin to religious attitude to it, or we look at it *as if it had* what Biswas calls a "quasi conscious existence" (p. 37), *as if it were* a "being for itself" (p. 37). Given these so many as-if's the

## BOOK REVIEW

concept of "Thou orientation" makes sense but then it is a metaphorical way of describing our relation/approach to a work of art. The same is true of Biswas's description, which uses the expression "dialogical relation". We need not overstretch the meaning of "having a dialogue with a work of art" as if it were literally true. Literally, it is patently false; metaphorically, it underscores the need to approach a work of art with an open mind, seriously, with a sense of personal involvement in understanding it. In his work, Biswas gives one the feeling as if he takes the locution "having a dialogue with a work of art" literally. Thus he speaks of what he calls "dialogic mode of intentionality" (p. 39), as if intentionality could be ascribed to a work of art *qua* a work of art.

All said, Goutam Biswas's *ART AS DIALOGUE* is informative and illuminating. It enriches our understanding of what our approach to a work of art should be. His work is a serious study of aesthetic experience and it equally commands the attention of all serious scholars in the field.

**V.K.BHARADWAJA**

**Statement Concerning Ownership and other Particulars about the  
Journal  
INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY  
Form : IV (RULE 8)**

- |    |                                   |   |
|----|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1. | Place of Publication              | Philosophy Department<br>University of Pune.<br>Pune - 411 007.   |
| 2. | Periodicity of its<br>Publication | Quarterly   |
| 3. | Printer's Name and<br>Address     | Shri. Sudhir S. Jadhav<br>Print Art Enterprises<br>847, Kasba Peth, Pune 411 011.   |
| 4. | Publisher's Name and<br>Address   | Dr. Shrinivas Vyankatesh Bokil<br>Philosophy Department,<br>University of Pune<br>Pune - 411 007.   |
|    | Whether Citizen of Indian         | Yes   |
| 5. | Editors' Names and<br>Addresses   | i) Dr. Shrinivas Vyankatesh Bokil<br>Philosophy Department,<br>University of Pune<br>Pune - 411 007.<br><br>ii) Dr. Rajendra Prasad<br>Opp. Stadium Main Gate,<br>Premchand Path,<br>Rajendra Nagar,<br>Patna - 800 016 |

- iii) Dr. Mrinal Miri  
 Director, Indian Institute of  
 Advanced Studies,  
 Rashtrapati Niwas,  
 Summer Hill, Shimla 171 005.
- vi) Dr. Sharad Deshpande  
 Philosophy Department  
 University of Pune.  
 Pune - 411 007.
- v) Dr. Pradeep P. Gokhale  
 Philosophy Department  
 University Of Pune.  
 Pune - 411 007.
- |   |  |
|---|--|
| Whether Citizen Of India  | Yes  |
| 6. Name and Address of the<br>Institute which owns<br>the Journal | Department of Philosophy<br>University of Pune.<br>Pune 411 007. |

I, Shrinivas Vyankatesh Bokil, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

**SHRINIVAS VYANKATESH BOKIL**

**INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY  
PUBLICATIONS**

- Daya Krishna and A.M. Ghose (eds) **Contemporary Philosophical Problems : Some Classical Indian Perspectives**, Rs. 10/-
- S.V. Bokil (Tran) **Elements of Metaphysics Within the Reach of Everyone**, Rs. 25/-
- A.P. Rao. **Three Lectures on John Rawls**, Rs. 10/-
- Ramchandra Gandhi (ed) **Language, Tradition and Modern Civilization**, Rs. 50/-
- S.S. Barlingay, **Beliefs, Reasons and Reflection**, Rs. 70/-
- Daya Krishna, A.M. Ghose and P. K. Shrivastav (eds) **The Philosophy of Kalidas Bhattacharyya**, Rs. 60/-
- M.P. Marathe, Meena A. Kelkar and P.P. Ghokhale (eds) **Studies in Jainism**, Rs. 50/-
- R. Sundara Rajan, **Innovative Competence and Social Change**, Rs. 25/-
- S.S. Barlingay (ed), **A Critical Survey of Completed Research Work in Philosophy in Indian University (upto 1980), Part I**, Rs. 50/-
- R.K. Gupta, **Exercise in Conceptual Understanding**, Rs. 25/-
- Vidyut Aklujkar, **Primary of Linguistic Units**, Rs. 30/-
- Rajendra Prasad, **Regularity, Normativity & Rules of Language**, Rs. 100/-

Contact :      The Editor  
                     **Indian Philosophical Quarterly**  
                     Department of Philosophy  
                     University of Poona,  
                     Pune 411 007