
UNIT 3 DALIT AESTHETIC OUTLOOK

Contents

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Aesthetic Richness of Dalit tradition
- 3.3 Dalit Experience and Expression of Beauty
- 3.4 Communitarian Aesthetics
- 3.5 Spirituality and Aesthetic Experience
- 3.6 Art of Leather-Making
- 3.7 Indian Music and Dance: Dalit Contribution
- 3.8 Divine Symbolism of the Drum
- 3.9 Dalit Songs and Dances
- 3.10 Dalit Skill of Weaving
- 3.11 Dalit Understanding of Body
- 3.12 *Chakalatwam*: Washing Clothes to Restoring Beauty
- 3.13 Cultural Aesthetics
- 3.14 Let us Sum up
- 3.15 Key Words
- 3.16 Further Readings and References

3.0 OBJECTIVES

Along with significant aspects of general and Indian aesthetic theory, the unit intends to present a more detailed outline of the nature and contribution of the art, music, cultural forms of Dalit tradition. Most part of the unit is a summarized idea of Kancha Ilaiah from his *Post-Hindu India*. We acknowledge greatly the contribution of this great analyst and thinker in the contemporary period to have unearthed and articulated values and world-view of the Dalits.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics as a science of arts is a distinct branch of philosophy. In Indian Dalit context it is more than mere the art-appreciation and art-experience. In its etymological meaning, the term 'Aesthetics' in Greek, means literally 'sense-perception.' From its initial meaning of science of sensitive cognition in the field of Arts, Aesthetics came to be recognized as 'philosophy of art. In the Indian context, it generally refers to the art-appreciation and art-experience of art forms. Aesthetics is thus understood as an appreciation of the arts. Generally, 'art' is defined as the use of the imagination to express ideas or feelings. Fine Art is the forms of art, painting, drawing, architecture, music, poetry and sculpture that are created to be beautiful rather than useful. Aesthetics is the philosophy dealing with the understanding the existence of beautiful things and human response to beauty. The issues arising out of artistic activities and human reaction to them and the intellectual activities connected with them are dealt in Aesthetics. The emphasis is on the notion of beauty.

3.2 AESTHETIC RICHNESS OF DALIT TRADITION

Aesthetic richness of Dalit tradition is expressed in Dalit art forms which are indigenous dance, poetic and drama forms. Combination of many art forms such as poetry, music, dance, painting and sculpture, instrument-making, pottery are founding the Dalit way of life. Dalit culture is expressed itself through art forms. All the forms of the fine arts are present in Dalit life. Aesthetical study of an indigenous art form of Dalits is enriching and challenging. Indian Aesthetics is generally confined to norms of philosophical aesthetics as presented and handed down by brahmanical tradition in both oral and written forms. Aesthetics in philosophy is the study of the feelings, concepts and judgments arising from our appreciation of the arts. Aesthetics is concerned with questions such as what is a work of art, work of art successful, art be a vehicle of truth, art work expressing the feelings of the artist, communicating feelings, arousing feelings, purging or symbolising feelings. Every art form reflects the society in which it is produced. The artists share the beliefs and attitudes of his fellow people and exploits and reproduces the themes and forms that he finds current. (Varghese 2008)

Dalit aesthetics is the culture of celebration. It expresses creativity, aesthetic richness in artefacts, and brings in harmony in music. They are expressed in the drum, illumination with light, burning crackers, appealing colour in costumes, all-out drink, imitating heroes / heroines, loud conversation, dancing in total abandon even during the funeral processions. There is a spirit of 'here and now,' with rootedness, immediacy, down-to-earth realism in Dalit aesthetics. They are the fruit of frequent physical association with sweat, blood, mud, seeds, sprouts and plants.

3.3 DALIT EXPERIENCE AND EXPRESSION OF BEAUTY

In Aesthetics, the artwork becomes a vehicle of beauty. The response towards the artwork from human beings form another aspect. In human response to any art work the artist who acquires the beauty and conveys it through his own expressions. There are those who observe those expressions and enjoy them. In understanding aesthetics it is usually said that Art or Fine Art is to do with things that are created to be beautiful rather than useful. There is it is theorized that aesthetics is more interested in the existence of beautiful things and the human response towards this beauty, rather than usefulness of the art form. The usefulness of art is least considered, as it is said, in aesthetical discourse. In Dalit aesthetic outlook it may be deeper than the normal understanding. What is beautiful is what is useful. All useful things in human life are beautiful. Usefulness of things is not separated from life as such. Life is beauty and full of beautiful things that are useful for living. (Varghese 2008)

3.4 COMMUNITARIAN AESTHETICS

Looking at the aesthetics of the Dalits may be viewed as the anthropologists' interest in inferring much about social structure, history and values of the societies and cultures. Classification of art forms may reflect a classification of societies. (Sparshott 1963). In Dalit aesthetics the artists are communitarian. They express their own understanding of Beauty conveyed through community art works. Those who enjoy the art work are also the community. The enduring art-product is

occasional, with its own date and place, when it is produced by an individual. The art-product of a community and the aesthetic object is beyond time and space. Once the art-product expresses the experiences of a particular society, through the proper understanding and appreciation of that art-forms any spectator can experience the same feelings of the society. Dalit art-forms enable one enters into the experiences of others and to have more intense and more fully rounded out experiences of one's own. Dalit aesthetics is communitarian. Expression of the community in the art-forms is evident. Through aesthetical study of the analysis of a particular art-form, one is able to reach the society that produced and to philosophise the feelings and experiences of that particular society. Spector-performer dichotomy is very thin in Dalit aesthetics.

3.5 SPIRITUALITY AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Recent Dalit history shows a tremendous change in their perception of themselves, the world and the dominant caste people. Today they make greater strides in every aspect of life with a very loud and clear assertive tone. By and large, the people elevating themselves to the upper echelons of the discriminatory caste hierarchy, tend to resist any integration of oral stories or written traditions from various cultures, religions, or literature of other people into their belief systems. These mild and articulate forms of resistance might be along the lines of their obsession with tall truth-claims or refusal to give up their powers and privileges of the high-caste leisure class. Dalit aesthetics has not risen out of leisure, but of labour and way of living. The native religio-cultural resources, belief systems, stories, traditions and rituals are quite often well integrated and incorporated those of the organised religions with written scriptures, creedal formulae, or cultic practices. In other words, the great traditions from various origins are quite naturally inter-textualized with the little traditions of the Dalit soil. But at the same time, the textual world of the so-called high caste people cannot claim primacy, monopoly or supremacy over the Dalits in generating meaningfulness for their life of struggle for establishing a caste-free humanity.

From the written sources of Indian aesthetics usually dominated by Brahmanical ideology, poetry, drama and music are identified as three art forms enhancing the study of art-experience elevating from the physical plane to a spiritual one, calling it as *rasa*-experience. The development of literature in Indian Aesthetics written tradition, is centred on *Natya-sastra* of Bharata. It has the description of characteristics of poetical works, *kavyalakshanam*, different types of dramas, *natakas* and music, *dhruvas*. Bharata gives the famous definition of *Rasa* in the aphoristic (*sutra*) form, referred to by the Aestheticians as '*Rasa-Sutra*' "*vibhava-anubhava-vyabhichari bhava-samyogaat-rasa nishpattihi* – The *rasa* is established by the combination of the determinants, *vibhava*, consequents, *anubhava*, and transitory emotions, *vyabhichari bhava*," There are commentaries to this treatise and the available one is that of Abhinavagupta. (Kindly, refer the unit on Indian Aesthetics also for further details on the above.)

Theory of *rasa* is the quality which arises out of both the art work and the response of the spectator. The art work is the expression of internal beauty of the Absolute and on the part of the audience it leads to ecstasy, *ananda*. *Rasa* becomes identical with the infinite, and the goal of the aesthetic experience becomes being 'one with' (Varghese 2008)

Sometimes this is called as ‘meta-aesthetics’ that is the transcendental nature from the physical plane to a spiritual plane through the art-work. Abhinavagupta speaks of siva as the universal self with nature of luminosity, consciousness and bliss. The universal energy, *sakti* is inseparable from Siva. Since the bliss nature of self is concealed due to impurities like ego, the art form becomes instrumental in removing the obstacles and bliss of the self gets manifested.

Dalit thinker Narayana Guru, although influenced by Vedantic ideology, present aesthetic theory that the sense of beauty enjoyed is one *Atma* or self, that manifests as the object, instrument and the enjoyer. He terms the subjective enjoyer as ‘*ahanta*’ and all the objective enjoyables as ‘*idanta*’. In the moment of enjoyment, he says, there is forgetting of the subjective and the objective conditioning leading to oneness of the self. It is a mysterious way of the self and is the relative process of God and an artwork. He talks about the horizontal kind of beauty-experience, that is, the experience of beauty is an enjoyer-enjoying and enjoyable. He considers that in both the beautiful and the ugly, the enlightenment is nothing but the unfolding of one *ananda-atma*. For him, the entire universe of enjoyment of Śiva is comparable to an epic conceived by a poetic genius. He speaks of both ecstasy and mystery in nature that reflects in art-works. (Kindly, refer the unit on Indian Aesthetics also for further details on the above.)

3.6 ART OF LEATHER-MAKING

Although the Hindu socio-cultural myth around leather being considered unclean and anti-divine material, in Dalits’ life, leather economy is totally different. Processing of leather was central to human existence and development. Culture and art forms are grown around a synthesis of agrarian production and village-centric production. In the act of peeling off of the skin from the carcass and converting it into leather there is techno-economic, proto-scientific process and creative philosophy. The procedure for the transformation of skin into leather and of leather into a commodity needed a mind that cuts through the myth of leather being impure. It is achieved over thousands of years in the community with mind-boggling experimentation with animal bodies and methods of peeling the skin off the bodies. They kept experimenting, proving and disproving until a common theoretical formula could emerge. Verifiability in this experimentation is opposed to the ritual mode of brahmanical spiritualism. The efficacy of ingredients like salt, bark, lime is established in turning the wet skin into sustainable leather. People used their memory to transmit the formula to future generation verbally, as oral tradition.

The leather bags, buckets and ropes, which were the primary requirements for the farmers are the products of this knowledge system. Peeling the skin without making holes in it from the dead body of the cattle involves certain skills like cultivation of hand and knife usage skills in a highly advanced way. The art is taught not by merely theoretical but practical method of training and being handed down from generation to generation. The scientific role of salt in keeping the wet skin from rotting was a great discovery in tanning. The process of salting, dipping in *tangedu* water, soaking in lime and washing is the normal way of treating skin to change into leather. The odd odour and release of pollutants generated during the process of ‘leatherization’ have a purpose of making a commodity for human welfare, as found in any modern technological production. Unfortunately, Brahmanism labelled it untouchable and socially isolated.

Nevertheless, ironically made use of leather products for musical instruments and developed aesthetic theories.

The use of hands and wooden stick to separate skin from the body without tearing the skin are done skilfully before knives were commonly used. The development of instruments to make leather into agrarian usable commodities like leather ropes, bags, and *chappals* and shoes and finally musical instruments show the great interaction among different professionals like farmers, Dalits, carpenters, iron smiths. The shaping of leather instruments was a process of creating, re-energizing and developing the human essence. It is a transcendental experience of giving shape and birth to a new shape. The whole art of leather work is creating a new thing from the body of a dead animal. In the art of *chappal* and shoe making, there involves a careful study of the foot and the toe. (Ilaiyah 2009, 31-42).

3.7 INDIAN MUSIC AND DANCE: DALIT CONTRIBUTION

From the Dalit perspective, language, song, music and art were not developed for leisure. It is contrary to the popular notion injected by Brahmanism. Music and art are organic expressions of the process of labour and production. Dalit philosophy is that work and song, *pani* and *pattu*, are part of life. Song and dance became a part of human existence. They are meant to lighten the burden of work and to re-energize people so that they could get back to creative and productive work once again. They are cultural instruments emerged in the productive communities and are part of organic process of expression of human productivity and creativity. A production process is not a social process, but a creative process, as it needs to discover and rediscover the instruments of production and the instruments to sharpen human skills and sensibilities in human interaction with nature. (Ilaiyah 2009, 42-43)

Dappu or *parai* (drum), is entirely made of leather and wood. A strip of wood is bent to form a ring, with a leather rope that holds both ends together. Holes are made in the wooden ring and a highly processed piece of leather is stitched onto one side. As the leather dries, it becomes taut and produces a musical sound at the slightest touch. The playing of the instrument is an artistic process as it is slung over the shoulder with a leather rope and with a very thin stick in the left hand and a big stick in the right, beaten in a rhythmic manner. The playing of the *dappu* is a collective process. The *dappu* produces a melodious sound that spreads across the vast area, making the social atmosphere very sacred and sensitized. The village environment in the company of green crops, mild breeze and bird singing, the music of the *dappu* produces a social collectiveness. It is used as an instrument of public announcements, *dandora*, and as a tool of mass communication, especially of festivities or death of someone in the village. It calls for social participation in the individual life events.

By its music the community becomes alert and brought to its cultural orgasm. It is an instrument producing music for the excitement, pleasure and relaxation of all communities. It is at the heart of any social event, weddings, in house warming functions, in festivities of birth and lamentations of death. *Dappu* becomes a social mobilizer, an instiller of the energy lost in the routine work of production and reproduction, relieving people of their physical fatigue and mental stress. It serves an enormous social purpose. In funeral processions, it reminds the

mourners of the cyclical process of life. After the mourning the dead and pondering over the futility of life, all return back to life involving in production and procreation in the face of inevitability of death. The *dappu* music reminds people that the feeling of *vairagya*, detachment from everyday life and renunciation, is not to last long. Everyone is to come back to life as production and procreation are fundamental and necessary part of life. The philosophical implication of *dappu* music is that it brings people back from the depths of despair and restores to everydayness of life, without minimizing loss of life, reality of death and sorrow. (Ilaiyah 2009, 44-45)

3.8 DIVINE SYMBOLISM AND THE DRUM

In drum, *dappu* or *parai*, there is a new ground of conceptual reimagining the relationship between Dalit religion and society. It is a Dalit discourse proclaiming the factuality and fecundity of Dalit socio-historical reality. In Tamil Nadu, A Dalit community is called as *pariyars*, as name derived from the instrument they have, *parai*, and whose occupation was drum-beating. The drum is their unique creative and constructive text of resistive and emancipatory religious discourse. The sound of the drum is a fitting counter image to the caste Hindu conception of word in a historical setting in which the *paraiyars* were severed from the sacred word. Secondly *parai* sound represents the functional power of Divine, an agent of Divine power, which resists the co-optive tendencies of dominant caste Hindus and to empower the collective subjectivity of the subaltern community. Using it as a religious symbol they claim that they are the indigenous people of South India. It is symbolically expressed through the drum. It is retained as memories of the ancient heritage, culture and religion of the *paraiyar*. (Sathianathan Clarke 1995)

The sound of the *dappu*, is used to sustain the social spirit of all. The sound is considered pure and used for divine and spiritual purposes by all, even by Brahmanical castes too. The Communist school of thought deployed the *dappu* for political propaganda and cultural movements and is very important to bring about a change in the social value of the maker and the player of *dappu*. There is a grand cultural narrative in the history of the *dappu*. The art historians of India, dominated with Brahmanical backgrounds, missed out on that grand narrative. (Ilaiyah 2009, 46)

The drum is related to the mediation of Divine power, which is the form of wisdom that is prior and complementary to the spoken and written sacred word. It symbolizes the centripetal dimension of orality in a dominantly literary-based context. Drum as it gathers together the strivings of subaltern communities, as an organizing symbol, represents the various features of the mode of thought and representation of morality. Drum conjoins both material and spiritual aspects of the mediation of Divine Blessedness. Religious symbol of drum provides an experiential making and sounding of the Divine. More than as an organizing symbol it is a religious symbol. The drum as medium of Divine human communication invokes, contains and dispenses divine power to society. The drum is an instrument of linking the subalternity of communities for resistive and emancipatory communal affirmation that exemplifies the solidarity of the human and divine in their resistance of human and demonic forces. The drum is a symbol of manifesting and managing corporate suffering. (Sathianathan Clarke 1995)

3.9 DALIT SONGS AND DANCES

In expressing beauty, Dalits are far more better than others in using the human body as the medium of communication. In dance it is very expressive.

Playing the musical instrument, singing and dancing are not an individual activity among the Dalits. Everyone right from a child to old persons knows how to play the instrument. The sound of the drum itself makes everyone to singing and dancing. Dalits allowed subsequent social intercourse to take place in dancing and singing. They have sustained and developed the process of humans entering into social intercourse with spiritual sanctity and social interaction. Dalits combine several skills and arts with them in dancing and playing the *dappu*. Many of the musical instruments of India used by many communities, have their roots in Dalit leather technology and designing skills. The *dolu* and *jaggu* the Yadavas use have a kinship with the *dappu*. Art, music and culture deriving from the Hindu worldview center on love, lust and violence, and images that are involved in such processes. The brahmanical instruments are played to express these emotions do not create egalitarian cultures but is based on individual-centred pleasures. In Dalit aesthetics there is a scope for liberation and *dappu* music and song have a communitarian appeal. In the present context of emancipation and identity formation of the Dalits, the *dappu* has become a powerful symbol for decasteization and egalitarian values. The social mobilizational ability of the *dappu*, is to be recognised as it still commands the consciousness of the Indian villages. In the cultural realm Dalit singing and dancing along with their indigenous musical instruments play a key role in challenging the hegemonical forces and play an important role in the socio-cultural and ideological struggle for independence. The *veena* and *murali*, were projected as cultural instruments of inspiration and national cultural symbols by powerful cultures. The Dalit aesthetics expressed through *dappu*, singing and dancing have a tremendous potential to rebuild the scientific spirit of the nation. (Ilaiyah 2009, 47-48).

3.10 DALIT SKILL OF WEAVING

Dalit skill of weaving is a great discovery of making the method of weaving cloth. They are the earliest producers of cloth although the cloth production went through several stages in India. In the beginning, jute cloth was produced then the cotton cloth and finally silk was woven. The knowledge of weaving all three types of clothes and building up the relevant technologies for their production was developed by the Dalits. The brahmanical knowledge system refused to recognize cloth production as a significant skill. Dalit aesthetics recognizes and brings out this great knowledge system and the skills involved in it. Producing cloth is not merely at the level of consumption. Clothes in Dalit aesthetics are seen as necessary to human existence and well being, which is just contrary to semi-naked aesthetics of brahmanical gods and *sannyasis*. (Ilaiyah 2009, 62-63)

3.11 DALIT UNDERSTANDING OF BODY

Dalits have a definite philosophical position of the human body, whether living or dead. Their discourse on the human body signifies a positive attitude. They believe that all human bodies are

constituted of flesh and blood, and they are not untouchable. All the bodies are touchable and all living bodies have a language and a psychology. All these can touch and exchange goods, commodities and ideas with one another and live in a state of social unity. For Brahmanism some bodies are spiritually different from others, and exclude and distinguish them from others. There is no rational basis for this exclusivity. Dalitism with its broader philosophical and humanitarian worldview, came to the rescue of the rest of the society by their timely disposal of the dead bodies, showing tremendous courage in removing the dead even during epidemics of cholera and other dreaded diseases. All such life-saving labour processes and scientific thinking are to be valued hugely and paid highly. The dalit regarded the human body composed of earth, water, fire and air and on burial these different elements in the body mix with the corresponding elements in nature. The chemical decomposition of the human body, in turn, re-energises the soil. This method of disposal of dead bodies provided to be an invaluable source of information both from archeological and anthropological point of view to understand the evolution of the human society in India. In contrast, Brahmanical Hinduism favoured cremation of the dead that destroys the possibility of a serious examination of the human skeletons and skulls that are available underground post-burial. Cremation is a cunning means of destroying the evidences of a violent process of killing, giving severe punishments like breaking of limbs, cutting off the tongue and nose etc. There is no evidence left for further generations to consider in cremation. Moreover, the cremation is unscientific and polluting. In Brahmanism, there is a lame excuse like cremation does not consume land and therefore economical. The dead are not considered as ghost in Dalit understanding. The weeping for the dead and sharing the sorrow of the family is connected with act of burial. (Ilaiah 2009, 63-66)

3.12 CHAKALATWAM: WASHING CLOTHES TO RESTORING BEAUTY

The Dalit community that washes the clothes of the whole village is the only community where women lead the creative humanitarian work and cultural process. In contrast to Hindu mode of life where women could not play any significant role in the society, Dalit women have vital role in the social process of washing of clothes. Professional cloth-washing involves washing all kinds of clothes. They have a unique culture and a sense of service which could be termed as *chakalatwam*. It is the social process of collecting dirty clothes from house to house, carrying them to the *dhobi ghat*, washing and drying them up. They have a social responsibility. Discovery of soil soap to wash the clothes must have been the earliest in the world. This ordinary soil soap is a specific soil that has light brown colour and contains the chemical character of a detergent. It, on touching, produces a burning sensation and washes dirt off one's hand at once. Mixing of this soil with water and dissolving it completely, the *dhobis* dip the clothes in it and heat up the water. Before settling upon this soil as the best, the *dhobis* must have gone through a process of experimenting with several kinds of soil which have less chemical elements. It was a process of elimination of the not so useful soil soaps and adaptation of the most useful soil for the purpose of washing the clothes clean. This process needs not only the ability to search for a soil that contains detergent quality, but also a comparative grasp of various kinds of soil and their qualities. The second major breakthrough in the process of washing was the process of heating the clothes after they are dipped in the water with soil soap. This enabled the killing of germs that carry diseases from person to person, as clothes are collected from many persons and put them together.

Prevention of spread of germs is the greater contribution by the *dhobis* by discovering the method of heating. It is the result of scientific thinking and the struggle of *Dhobis* to invent new technologies to develop the human health. Discovering and improving the use of soil soap and the process of boiling technologies and methods of using them are done with process of observation and analysis with creativity. This development of health science is not an act of superstition, not of religion but a process of negotiation with reason and faith. In fact, this is true spiritual philosophy of washing of dirt and restoring the beauty and health. It is a contribution of *Dhobis* with a philosophical notion of health, economy and the aesthetics of human life, and its relationship with nature as a whole. (Ilaiah 2009, 69-72)

3.13 CULTURAL AESTHETICS

The philosophy of washing one's body or one's clothes is rooted in the developed notion of human health. Good health and social cleanliness are part of health science. From the art of wearing clothes evolved the health science. One dimension of this is the basic health of human beings which is related to the consumption of food and washing one's own body. Second dimension is that of cleanliness of clothes. Wearing clothes is meant for both the protection of the human body and for increasing the human productive energy. Ideological constructions evolved around these two dimensions in the human history. The type of clothes people wear and the method of wearing them becomes the concept of beauty and other aesthetic notions. The cultural aesthetics is constructed around clothes; in the way people wear their dresses and the kind of colours they choose and the kind of cleanliness they maintain. From the Dalits the aesthetics of wearing clothes came into being; at the level of weaving, at the level of stitching and at the level of cleaning. But for these communities, the notion of aesthetics of dress would not have been evolved in India. (Ilaiah 2009, 72-73)

3.14 LET US SUM UP

The unit dealt with the concept of beauty, skills and art from the Dalit perspective and culture. More than spiritualizing the art, dance and music, Dalit Aesthetics dwells on the ground realities coupled with their way of life. The prominent feature of its aesthetics is communitarian and participatory than individual pleasure and bliss. As many Dalit intellectuals try to affirm and assert the intrinsic value of Dalit culture against the century long systematic destruction of Dalit Aesthetics by the dominant ideologies of Brahmanical Hinduism. However, one has to be very conscious in identifying and developing Dalit Aesthetics not by searching for the written documents but in the experiential life stories and oral traditions of the Dalits. From the oppressive tradition, strong tendency to construct concept of Beauty and fine arts from the Brahmanical perspective has influenced many. The general notion of Dalit being dirty, shabby, untidy, indecent, rough and not refined, is the outcome of Brahmanical construction. However, beauty of Dalit culture is yet to be manifested with larger scope.

3.15 KEY WORDS

Dappa: Muscial Instruments used by Dalits in all major event. *Parai* or drum.

Chakalatwam: Social Process of washing of clothes – a unique culture and a sense of service which could is termed as *chakalatwam*.

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