

# The Message of Beauty to Civilization

by: Shrimati Rukmini Devi

Published in the 1900's  
Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Chennai [Madras] India  
The Theosophist Office, Adyar, Madras. India

IN his introduction DR. ARUNDALE said:

Rukmini is perhaps particularly qualified to speak to us on this subject of beauty because in her own motherland, India, she is hard at work to promote in every possible way the cultural renaissance of that great country. Anyone who knows India, knows how beautiful India is, how marvellous she has been and how no less wonderful is her future destiny. Without India, without the co-operation of the soul of India, the world cannot hope to solve its problems, for it is no exaggeration at all to say that India is in very truth the heart of the world. Her music, her philosophy, her science, her architecture, all have their very special magnificence, and I would only say that you should see how wonderful is dancing when devoted and dedicated to great ideals and consecrated to the expression of magnificent aspiration.

Quite recently Shrimati Rukmini has been giving some Indian classical dance recitals, and [Page 2] she is acclaimed in her own country as one who in that particular field is arousing India. to a remembrance of her past greatness and is helping her to tread her new way of unfoldment. She is to speak to us on the subject of "The Message of Beauty to Civilization", but with special reference of course to India's contribution to world culture.

Rukmini Devi :

## WHAT IS BEAUTY ?

I have a very difficult task before me in speaking about Beauty, because the Divine Beauty cannot be expressed in words; nor can it be expressed in any limited form at all in this mundane world, though you may find everywhere great beauty, great manifestations of the Divine. What is beauty ? It is the manifestation of the Divine in form, in colour, in nature and in all the kingdoms of nature, in individuals, in humanity, in civilization in general and in all things. All things seen and unseen are beautiful when expressed by the Divine in His own way. But we who are of this earthly existence can naturally comprehend [Page 3] only a very small portion of that divine beauty.

During my talk I shall refer sometimes to India, but you must remember that even if I do not mention the word " India", yet a great deal of the background of my life, of my thoughts and my feelings is derived from India and the inspiration that India has given me.

Beauty is not only that which is seen by an artist; it is not only that which belongs to a sunset; it is not only that which you find in a jewel. Beauty is found in our own life, and in the manifestation of that life

which we can give so far as is humanly possible. We can make a great gift of beauty to the world, but there will be much more yet to be given. It is a wonderful thing, nevertheless, that we can never understand the end of all that is beautiful, for we do not know the beginning. We know that from age to age the conception of beauty changes; from age to age we grow from the understanding of beauty at one stage to the understanding of it at another stage. We find, for example, that the appreciation of beauty differs in every country. How limited is our knowledge and our power to understand beauty is apparent when we travel round the [Page 4] world. It is a most singular thing that what is considered wonderfully beautiful in India is not necessarily beautiful to the westerner, and what is considered beautiful by the westerner may not be beautiful to the Indian or the eastern person.

But that does not matter, because each one expresses beauty according to his own idea; and the more limited his idea is, the intenser the expression along his particular line, though it is possible to have an understanding of universal beauty and yet be able to express that along one particular line. I think that beauty belongs to life and to all things.

### **GOD SPEAKS THROUGH BEAUTY**

Why are we talking about the message of beauty? Because beauty is the medium of culture, and because culture is the only back-ground that will cause humanity to become greater and nobler.

Wherever there has been a great civilization, the manifestation of the higher ideals of life has shown in beautiful forms. Can anything great ever be expressed through ugly forms? Can there be heavenly music with discord? Can there be lovely painting with vulgarity? [Page 5] There cannot be greatness in the world of any kind, not only in the actual subject of art but in all other subjects, unless the medium is beautiful. There can be no oratory without beauty of language, no sculpture without beauty of form, no great pictures without beautiful colours, no religion without a beautiful expression, no poetry without beautiful words. So we find everywhere in the great civilizations that beauty is the medium, though it be not the only medium, through which the Divine expresses Himself.

### **BEAUTY AMONG THE ANCIENTS**

Beauty is the medium through which the Divine expresses Himself in all the small things, even of everyday life. You find in Greece beauty was almost a goal — a goal of expression in beautiful forms, in lovely statues. Orpheus, the great and wise Teacher, was able to make gentle the fiercest of animals through the harmony of his music. And in Egypt, where beauty was not definitely an end, a goal, the Egyptians expressed themselves in beautiful terms, in beautiful colours, beautiful jewels, beautiful ideas and beautiful temples. Excavators today are finding these marvellous and [Page 6] magnificent things, which must surely make every human being wish that our civilization should some day express itself in some such wonderful forms as did Greece and Egypt.

So you find beauty in other great nations, and especially to my knowledge in India. But in India there is this great difference: that the beauty which was expressed in ancient India, of which the keynote was spirituality, is fortunately available even today. It is not buried underground for excavators to find, but is everywhere for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. India is the land where not only have the

people expressed their spirituality through beauty of form, in temples, in music, in dancing and in philosophy, but they have expressed beauty in spiritual ideals applied to daily life.

### THE DIVINE DANCER

Not only do they apply beauty to all daily life, but they can explain to you the philosophy of beauty. In India you find the ideal of the temple dancer is that God Himself should be worshipped through the arts. In India you may worship Him not only through music but through all the arts. There they have [Page 7] combined the religious spirit with the idea of beauty and great art, and you find in the Hindu religion that the Lord of the Dance has His manifestation as a Divine Dancer.

We are told that the Lord of the Dance was asked by a very great man to explain to him something of the philosophy of the four Vedas, the great scriptures of the Hindus. The Lord tried to explain the philosophy to him, but the man said: "I cannot understand it in those forms. They are too difficult. Can you not show them to me in some simpler form, so that I can appreciate them?" Then the Lord created the fifth Veda, the Veda of the Dance, and He showed that all the philosophy of life, all the science of life, can be expressed through the moving form and music.

So He danced His Divine Dance, and as He danced the whole Universe danced with Him. They say that He rules the Universe as He dances. So you can see what a high place Hinduism has given to the art of the dance. You will find also in music exactly the same principle applied, and so in all the arts. The West expresses itself in great arts, but the West does not know the why and the wherefore. But India can tell you why and for what reason you are doing such and such a thing. [Page 8] So in music, Hinduism will tell you what its meaning is, what its spiritual significance is, and what the exact effect is upon humanity. The Hindus have worked out a musical science, a marvellous and glorious science, for to them music is as much an offering to the Highest as flowers are, or any beautiful object of sacrifice.

### EVERYONE A CREATIVE ARTIST

That is the great and wonderful conception which I think the East can give to the West. We have to realize that this great art, not only applied by the artist but applied by every individual in life, can become a great and wonderful thing. Every individual in life reacts to beauty. We all express in our own way the nature around us. Each country expresses it, through you and through me. You find that everything around us has power to influence us, whether we know it or not. Every single thing has an effect upon us; even if we are not great artists, and do not appreciate the technique of art, yet in our own small way we look for that which is beautiful, and even the poorest and the simplest, the handicapped man, may create great pieces of art. He creates them unconsciously, [Page 9] because of his own love for the beautiful. The ordinary cook, the ordinary servant, can appreciate the beautiful if only it is something of his own creative art. Every individual has in him the spirit of the artist, and therefore every individual in his own way is an artist.

We have to learn more and more of the beautiful. The more we respond to the beautiful, the more will our religion become beautiful. the more will our civilization become beautiful, the more will our daily lives become beautiful, and we shall get rid of the many ugly things that exist in the world. Myriads of ugly

things exist, but these will go as we learn to react to beauty perfectly. But we cannot fully react to beauty unless those who are leaders in the life of the nations react to art and appreciate art. Artists are interpreters of the divine. They bring down into form that which is divine in themselves. Art is the highest religion that humanity has; art is a religion that expresses itself in a different way from religion.

### **THE RELIGIOUS SPIRIT**

We must once more bring into the world the true religious spirit that goes hand in hand [Page 10] with art. No art can flourish in these days without the religious spirit. I do not mean by "religious spirit" that we should all belong to religious organizations, that we should all go to worship in churches and temples, but that we should have the same inspiration, the complete abandonment of soul, that we should have the same purity of dedication in our daily lives that we show at the altar in the church or in the temple. We have to realize that the religious spirit is that which makes all the outward things of man turn within to the inner God that is in man.

In the same way beauty is an expression of the God that is within trying to express itself without in terms of form. We should try to combine true emotion with mind. It is not possible in this world to create art only with the mind, because if we do it is bound to die; it can last only a very short time. All the great masterpieces of art conceived in the past have been those of pure inspiration, which has combined both emotion and mind and has gone beyond to the plane of intuition and brought down its ideals into solid matter. If we can use emotion and if we can use mind and combine the two to derive true inspiration, then we can create great forms, but if we have [Page 11] only emotion or if we have only mind, then we cannot create great forms, just as if we have only men or if we have only women, then we cannot create men.

The religious spirit must come again into the world before art will be great, before great artists can be born. Then, not only will individuals be inspired, but whole nations and continents. Many great people have created wonderful things from which we derive inspiration. But we need more artists who will express the greatness and the beauty of all time. In a single object of art, such artists will show you eternity; they will take you into the realms of the beautiful, and they will bring power, sympathy and reverence into the world. Through our adoration of the beautiful and reaction to the beautiful we shall become one with the beautiful, and, because of that we shall remove ugliness and we shall remove unhappiness from the world.

### **BEAUTY BRINGS HAPPINESS**

If every truly cultured man or woman would realize his responsibility to beauty, then we should never have unhappiness in the world. One of the ugliest things in civilization today is [Page 12] unhappiness, in terms of war, in terms of vivisection, cruelty, and all other sorts of unkindness, even in terms of prejudice.

Fortunately artists seek beauty everywhere, they look for art, no matter what country it may come from; remember that the universality which art can bring into our lives will give us the same universality of understanding in every other department of nature, and therefore an inherent dislike of that which is ugly, of that which is cruel. We shall not be able to tolerate ugly speech or vulgarity.

What is worse in the world than vulgarity expressed in art ? I am sorry that in modern times there exists so much vulgarity and ugliness alongside some very fine conceptions expressed in works of art. Some modern artists use the technique of art to express that which is inartistic and ugly. To me that is not art. And if we degrade art to express to humanity that which is ugly, then we are degrading one of the most sacred things of life. This is what is happening in our modern civilization, and we need again to make a great contribution that will place the arts on a high pedestal of worship so that there will be no place in art for vulgarity. [Page 13]

### THE MESSAGE OF INDIA

I will not say it is impossible to find mediocre art in India, but when India realizes her own message that beauty is sacred, that beauty brings happiness into the world, when the great arts that exist in India today which are unconscious and simple shall become conscious — when India realizes that, that consciousness is what she must give to the world, then India will make a distinct contribution to other civilizations.

### BEAUTY AND COMPASSION

In this respect the West has much to learn. The West has the technique. It has the power to go ahead. It has the idea of mass production. It has tried to express itself not only in the accepted terms of art, statues, painting, music, and other art forms, but it is extending art to industry, to films and to other departments of life as well. But what good is it to extend the arts to all the departments of life if we do not know what art means, if we do not know what it conveys ? Just as people talk about ideals and are unable to practise them, so it happens that people talk [Page 14] about art and are unable to express it. We must see, therefore, that we not merely talk of art, but that we express it in every phase of life, knowing that whatever we do, whatever we say, no matter how little, if it is ugly it is bound to produce an ugly reaction in character. No matter what our actions are, if they are not done in terms of beauty we cannot create beauty of character, we cannot have universality of love, that brotherhood and understanding which we are all seeking in every department of life.

But if we truly understand art, and if we truly combine the arts, so that art is a divine thing, then truly compassion will come into the world. Animals will not be subjected to cruelty and unhappiness any more. None of these things are beautiful. In fact the cruelties of man are the most ugly things that can possibly imagine in this world. The same will happen in all other walks of life. When compassion comes, children will become happy and education will be made beautiful. The idea that beauty and compassion go hand in hand has been given to us by the great Teachers of the world. That idea we can revive beauty — and compassion must come again to our civilization. [Page 15]

### NO NATIONALISM IN BEAUTY

We find that the same ideals of beauty can be expressed in the realm of internationalism, can be expressed through the different phases of our civilization. Think of the true place of woman in civilization. In India they have always realized, as we know from the old books, that woman is the finest expression of art, that woman is the soul of beauty, and therefore the Divine Being is worshipped in terms of the beautiful, of the woman. He is expressed as man and woman: He expresses the fineness, the grace of

woman; He expresses the greatness, the grandeur of man. He expresses the refinement and the dignity of motherhood, while He expresses the activity, the creative spirit and the manhood of man. All these things are written in the Hindu books, and the more one studies the more one is assured that we can bring all these ideas into the modern world.

These ideas, like all great ideas, do not belong merely to India, to anyone nation, but to the whole world, to everyone. If I were not to say they came from India, you might accept them, for those who are [Page 16] prejudiced might say they are of Hinduism, they do not belong here. They belong to people, everywhere. Just as beautiful things of the East belong to the West, so beautiful things of the West belong to the East. There is no barrier of nationality when greatness and beauty come into the world.

We should learn not merely to have the ordinary everyday ideal of beauty. It is all right, of course, to go to a picture gallery and criticize a few pictures. The majority of people do not know what they are saying, and they are willing to follow what other people say. They have no standards of judgment. They do not know what is beautiful. What matters is that they should learn to know, that they should find out for themselves and know for themselves what is the beautiful in their own natures and what is the highest in life. They should know what is the place of man and of woman in civilization.

### **WOMAN'S PLACE IN THE WORLD**

The women of the West — I hope you do not mind my saying it — do not realize or understand what womanhood really is. They who think it is a matter of working in the world to [Page 17] earn one's own livelihood, to be independent, to go one's own way — to those all that is splendid. If only woman knew what her own way is! What is her independence for? What does she want her freedom for? What is her place? Is it merely to be a copy of a man? It is to be herself more than anything else, to be divine in her own being, to be a piece of art, not only an artist. For the true emotional spirit of art is one with the true emotional spirit of woman; and if these two can combine, whether in the home or in politics, whether, according to modern times, even at a typewriter, then woman can be her real self and can express herself through all the graces of life, the beauties and the refinements of life, and the influence she can bring upon her surroundings. And that influence must be entirely cultural, entirely refined.

### **THE DIVINE WOMAN**

I do not care what work Woman does, but I do care what life she expresses. She must express the true life of the Divine Woman. She has her own mission in life. She is a great artist who must help the future civilization. She must refine life. She must express [Page 18] compassion and kindness and love. She has the power to bring great happiness into the world. She is not meant to sacrifice the finenesses and refinements of life for the sake of pleasures that are gross and ugly and degraded. Does woman realize that whether she is a mother or not physically, she is a mother of the whole world? She must contribute this spirit of motherhood to the world in every department of life. That is the highest and greatest contribution of woman.

Woman needs also to know the sacred place of sex. It is a vessel filled with the divine life, and she may bring down this divine life into ordinary life. Sex is not a matter to be talked about lightly in drawing-

rooms. It is not something to indulge in. It is something that we should approach with respect, that we should approach with worship, and delicately. Only thus shall we know what happiness is. That is the greatest art a woman can bring into the world. She can paint, make statues, speak in public, do anything she likes, but unless she lives the life of a true woman and a true artist, she is not going to become great, she is not going to express any message to civilization, or contribute to the happiness of mankind. [Page 19]

### THE UNIVERSAL MOTHER

But if woman can deliver her great message; then shortly there can be no more war, no more cruelty. To a true woman the life of an animal is just as wonderful as the life of the human child. What is the difference between a child and an animal? You may say the child has a soul and the animal has not. What does it matter to us whether the child has a soul or not? So far as we can see, it is the same as the animal; it has the same charm; the same beauty. The child cannot speak, nor can the animal; so in that respect they are in the same category. To the true woman the animal becomes her child. Anyone who is suffering is like her own son or her own daughter. That is the ideal spirit she must have, which is an outcome of an appreciation of all that which is beautiful and wonderful in life.

### MESSENGERS OF THE DIVINE

I do not want to go into all that is ugly, because even to speak about ugliness is an unhappy thing to do. In order to find all that is beautiful, let us think of the aspirations of [Page 20] other kingdoms of nature to their own highest expression. Let us realize that as each kingdom of nature has aspired to express in highest terms that which is most beautiful, so must we try to express ourselves at our highest, so that no ugliness may arise in our daily lives in the small things of life. The artists must be the messengers of the divine, of the beautiful. They must bring before your eyes that which is beautiful in your own nation. They must be able in a piece of art to sum up that which is your own life, your own being. Whatever is your nation, that the artist must fulfil; whatever is your keynote, that the artist must express.

Not only that, but the true artist will express the future of the world; he will express music, all great things, in terms of eternity, so that the masterpieces he creates shall live not merely today, shall not be acclaimed by great critics a year or two hence and despised after a hundred years, but centuries hence people shall say of them how great was the civilization that existed then. The only true art is that which belongs to all times. Our appreciation may change, but beauty of expression never changes, though it may have different forms. [Page 21]

The artist must catch the inspiration of the highest. It is not for him to say in words what is beautiful, but to show in his art the true divinity of his own nature, to be able to show what is lovely and beautiful and worth while in life. As God creates in nature, so can the artist create in divine forms. God creates mountains and oceans, while the artist creates in sculpture, paintings and music. But think of the beauty that is created in mountains and oceans. If man can grow in greatness and create in that same spirit, then he will create something as universal and as worth while as the wonderful creations of nature.

**THE GREATEST THING IN CIVILIZATION**

There is only one beauty and one art, and through art will come into the world real culture and true refinement. Culture is not a thing that you and I can bring to the world by mere learning of manners in everyday life. It is not a thing that is woven by words or manners alone; it is something woven by centuries of experience. We express it in our ideas and our speech. Even in our dress a keynote of culture exists, as in the common things of daily [Page 22] life. Only in this way shall we attain that high keynote of civilization which was sounded by great civilizations in the past. We are on the threshold of a new era. It is rising to its climax. We are going through different phases, but we have not yet come to one universality of purpose. There is still much ugliness in art as well as beauty, much vulgarity as well as refinement, much vileness as well as greatness. Ugliness and vulgarity can have no place in art. If we truly feel that with our hearts and minds, then shall we know art as an offering to God. Art is the equivalent for humanity of the flower and the jewel — as these are the most perfect things in their respective kingdoms, so is art the greatest thing in civilization. Let us remember that in our humanity we must show the greatness of the flower, we must attain the greatness of the jewel, each in its own kingdom, and express this greatness in terms of understanding, in terms of kindness, in terms of beauty in everyday living. Remember that every single individual is an artist. There is no barrier in art. Let us bring the materialistic happiness and the contribution of technique of the West to the spiritual ideas and philosophy of the East. Let us combine the two, and thus we shall [Page 23] have true art and true greatness in civilization, and then only will the Message of Beauty have its fulfilment.