

Beauty: a fundamental organizing system in the 'relational' world

By Shakti Maira

Beauty has become trivialized and de-legitimized in the last couple of hundred years. The word itself has lost much of its meaning having become a general and amorphous adjective.

'Is beauty skin deep?' is a question that has been asked, and the answer collectively given is 'yes' because we locate beauty on the surface of things, on visible forms, and even literally on the skin.

Two other widespread confusions about beauty are: 1) the subjectivity associated with it – captured by the popular adage, 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder', and 2) fixed definitions of beauty – which qualify some things and some people as beautiful and others as not, with all the attendant problems of who decides what is beautiful, and the cultural and gender issues that are wound up with the idea that beauty is fixed and definable. It isn't. Moreover, these are related misunderstandings.

In the knowledge systems of India some these problems are obviated by an important concept about beauty: it is an experience and not the property of any object or thing. Objects, or other stimuli, cause the beauty experience, which like all experiences, is temporal and relational.

If beauty was understood as a cluster of organizing values for all relational systems, whether in nature or man-made, we would not have many of the systemic problems we face today such as the environmental crisis, economic systems that lead to increased disparities of income, wasteful consumption, and the depletion of resources.

Beauty may well be a vital master key in the new thinking about nature, environment, technology, health, sciences and economics. It offers us a much needed relational 'value' or 'quality' framework.