DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION SERIES NO. 5

A Coomaraswamy Spectrum

A. RANGANATHAN

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A COOMARASWAMY SPECTRUM

With kind Regds
from my hand
Mrs S. Rama Rao
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Published for

INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION
MADRAS

By

THE CHRISTIAN LITERATURE SOCIETY
MADRAS

Published by

THE CHRISTIAN LITERATURE SOCIETY

POST BOX 501, PARK TOWN, MADRAS 600 003

First printed 1981

Cover design by MADHU ADS

PRINTED AT THE DIOCESAN PRESS, MADRAS 600 007—1981. C2259

FOREWORD

No account of the changed cultural configuration of the world of the 20th century can be complete which does not include the tremendous contribution by Ananda Coomaraswamy to its remaking. We of the East owe a great debt of gratitude to this versatile genius who did so much to make the West aware of the religious, cultural and artistic wealth of India in particular and Asia in general. The son of a distinguished Jaffna Tamil father and an English mother, he represented in his own person the fusion of the best in the cultures of both East and West. On his 70th birthday in August 1947 he was rightly hailed as a "pontifex"—a bridge builder—by Graham Carey on behalf of the eminent men and women who met in Boston to felicitate him. As his faithful and dedicated admirer, S. Durai Raja Singam, puts it: "Coomaraswamy was a great interpreter of the East to the West, and the West to the East (in space); and an interpreter of the past to the present (in time). He explained the best in the West to the East, and the best in the East to the West. He also explained the wisdom of the past to the present that stands in such need of it".

The birth centenary of Coomaraswamy in 1977 saw a revival of interest in the man and his work. Notable among the publications that year are the books produced by S. Durai Raja Singam and Roger Lipsey. The latter had, in 1974, already brought out a substantial pre-centennial tribute to the *kala yogi* in words and pictures. To this he added yet another volume in 1977 placing all students in debt to him as a major source of knowledge

about Ananda Coomaraswamy. In the same centennial year the Princeton University Press brought out three admirable volumes in the Bollingen Series made possible by the devoted research of Roger Lipsey. The first two volumes bring together Coomaraswamy's prolific writings while the third volume is scholarly assessment of his life and work by Lipsey.

Here in India we have another able and dedicated student and admirer of Coomaraswamy in A. Ranganathan, a distinguished free lance journalist and writer. He has done much to keep alive both the memory and the continuing value and significance of Ananda Coomaraswamy for our times. In the brief compass of seven radio talks Ranganathan really creates a vivid and absorbing spectrum which enables us to grasp the many-sided contribution of Coomaraswamy to the renaissance of Indian and Asian cultures and to a deepened appreciation of their religions, philosophies, aesthetics and art in the West.

We are happy to publish these broadcast talks because this Institute stands for a holistic interpretation of development which believes that every human being is entitled to the religious, cultural and artistic riches created by the labours of many races and civilizations over the centuries. No worthwhile new international order can emerge if it is not based on mutual understanding and appreciation of our diverse cultures as a common human resource shared by all mankind. In spite of the striking growth of the electronic media, telecommunications and aerial transport the international ideals formulated by UNESCO have yet to find global expression—and will not do so until the homes, the classrooms, the factories and the multifarious institutions

and associations of every land become a means for assimilating, propagating and implementing the universal outlook and values of great souls like Ananda Coomaraswamy.

Both Ranganathan and I are fortunate to be in contact with S. Durai Raja Singam whom I had the pleasure of meeting in Kuala Lumpur last year. It is fitting that Ranganathan's dedication is to both Dona Louisa Coomaraswamy and Ananda Krishna, the son of Durai Raja Singam, a promising young man whose untimely death we continue to mourn.

We express our thanks to the A.I.R. of Madras and Gauhati for their kind permission to publish these broadcast talks enabling us to share in the wish of many of Coomaraswamy's admirers of "remembering and remembering again and again" (*smrtva smrtva punah punah*) his contribution to the broadening of their vision of a humanity ennobled by a universal and divine providence for all time and eternity.

Madras,
April 15, 1981

CHANDRAN D. S. DEVANESEN,
Director,
Institute for Development Education.

I

INTRODUCING ANANDA COOMARASWAMY

Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy, best remembered as the author of *The Dance of Shiva*, was one of the most versatile minds of his generation. Indeed Coomaraswamy was brilliantly polymath and his work encompassing aesthetics and literary criticism, reflects the deepest intuitions of the perennial tradition derived from Indian and European sources. For the spectrum of his thought can be viewed at different wave-lengths. And Coomaraswamy who had an unusual background, was a man of varied talents and interests—a scientists, an aesthetic philosopher of Indian Nationalism, an interpreter of Indian art in its wider perspectives, a man of letters and an exponent of the Perennial Philosophy.

Born of a Tamil father and an English mother in Colombo, brought up and educated in England, he spent the most creative phase of his life as an interpreter of Indian aesthetics in America. A brilliant scientist who was associated with the discoveries of *Thorianite* and *Serindibite*, Coomaraswamy became an authentic exponent of the perennial tradition in art, literature and religion. Child of Ceylon and England, he became an Indian in the same deep sense in which Henry James transformed himself into an European and T. S. Eliot retransplanted himself into an Englishman. However, despite this paradoxical setting, one can perceive the recovery of aesthetic significance at the deepest levels of philosophical questioning and spiritual awakening in the writings of Coomaraswamy.

Undoubtedly the aesthetic philosophy of Indian nationalism found its most articulate exponent in Coomaraswamy during the first decade of the twentieth century. In one of his *Essays in National Idealism* he wrote : 'We want our India for ourselves because we believe each nation has its own part to play in the long tale of human progress and nations which are not free to develop their individuality and character are also unable to make the contribution to the sum of human culture which the world has a right to expect of them.' In other words, he argued that every nation ought to make its own contribution to what Mazzini acclaimed as 'the concert of mankind, the orchestra of human genius'. To him the word 'Nationalism' denoted the cultural expression of a nation. When India had attained independence, his message was 'Be Yourself'. It placed the accent on aesthetic authenticity and not on the political content of freedom. 'Nations' observed Coomaraswamy, 'are created by poets and artists, not by merchants and politicians. In art lie the deepest life principles.'

In his famous oration delivered before the Phi Bata Kappa Society in 1837, Emerson had castigated American writers for their subservience to the artists of Europe and called on them to create an indigenous literature. His oration has been justly hailed as 'Americas declaration of intellectual independence'. Similarly to Coomaraswamy, Indian nationalism was a quest for self-realisation, a declaration of spiritual independence. We cannot understand the full significance of Coomaraswamy's philosophy of Indian nationalism without perceiving the aesthetic impact of the theory of 'dhvani' on his philosophy of Indian art. The word 'dhvani' literally means suggestion in an aesthetic sense and was developed into an elaborate

theory by Anandavardhana, the celebrated critic of the ninth century A.D. While the *Dhvanyaloka* of Anandavardhana, the *locus classicus* in Indian literary criticism, deals with the aesthetic significance of words and their subtle undertones, Coomaraswamy reflected on the significance of art motifs and their symbolic meanings. Thus Coomaraswamy's approach to nationalism, combined the patriotic spirit of Mazzini, the intellectual freedom of Emerson and the aesthetic insight of Anandavardhana.

Between 1895, when as a young man of eighteen he published his first article *The Geology of Doverow Hill* and 1947, his seventieth year, he became the author of more than five hundred publications. Their scope is astonishing. He had collaborated with G. K. Duggirala in translating Nandikesvara's classic on *Abhinaya* entitled *The Mirror of Gesture*. The rest of his publications range from his collection of essays entitled *The Dance of Shiva* to such works as *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, *Hinduism and Buddhism* and *A New Approach to the Vedas*. The *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, which was published in 1927, is his chief contribution to the study of Indian art in its historical, sociological and philosophical contexts. Beginning with the Indo-Sumerian finds, it gives a clear and connected historical account of the entire history of Indian and Indonesian Art, with special emphasis on problems relating to the Indian origin of the Buddha image.

Coomaraswamy's profound grasp of the various interrelated disciplines helped him to realize the twin ideals of harmony and truth in all Indian Art. This is because the Indian mind apperceives reality in the realm of ideas, rather than in the world of objects, in the abstract rather

than in the concrete. For instance, the peculiarly Indian practice of weaving music and painting into a creative pattern of aesthetic harmony illustrates this ideal. Each painting is an interpretation in form and colour of a particular raga or ragini. Similarly on listening to a raga or ragini, one can visualize the particular painting. Furthermore, while reflecting on the dramatic gesture of *Nalina-padmakosa* in Bharata's *Natya Sastra*, one is irresistably reminded of such works of art as Kalidasa's *Abijnana Sakuntalam* and the Ajanta Frescoes. For this lovely gesture which is symbolic of the lotus bud, unveils poetic vistas of the watering of the trees by Sakuntala in Kanva's hermitage.

Though Coomaraswamy wrote much, he always wrote well. A master of the aphoristic style, in his discourse he blended thought and feeling, poetical fervour and lucid exposition. For example, he writes about the Dance of Shiva :

'If we could reconcile Time with Eternity, we can scarcely do so otherwise than by the conception of alternations of phase extending over vast regions of space and great tracts of time. Especially significant, then, is the phase alternation implied by the drum, and the fire which "changes" not destroys. These are but visual symbols of the theory of the day and night of Brahma. In the night of Brahma, Nature is inert, and cannot dance till Shiva wills it : He rises from His rapture, and dancing sends through inert matter pulsing waves of awakening sound, and lo ! matter also dances appearing as a glory round about Him. Dancing He sustains its manifold phenomena. In the fullness of time, still dancing He destroys all forms and names by fire and gives new rest. This is poetry ; but none the less, science.'

This description of the dancing Shiva suggests T. S. Eliot's memorable lines :

> .... Neither flesh nor fleshless
> Neither from nor towards ; at the still point
> there the dance is.

It also suggests the vision of Yeats in which all opposites are transcended and united in the cosmic dance :

> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance
> How can we know the dancer from the dance ?

And the dance which is the climactic symbol of Yeats' holy city of Byzantium evokes visions of Chidambaram in Tirumoolar's " Tirukoothu Tarshinam." Indeed the aesthetic dialectic which fuses Ireland and Byzantium, Chidambaram and the self, is creatively sustained in those sublime 'poems dealing with change and the changeless. Thus it is clear that Coomaraswamy had formulated his vision of Indian art in the concept of the Dancing Shiva. He has explained in his work on *The Transformation of Nature in Art* that the Dance of Shiva takes place, not merely in the Taraka Forest, nor even at Chidambaram, but in the heart of the worshipper'. And in his celebrated essay entitled *The Dance of Shiva* he wrote : " It is not strange that the figure of Nataraja has commanded the adoration of so many generations past ; familiar with all scepticisms, expert in tracing all beliefs to primitive superstitions, explorers of the infinitely great and indefinitely small, we are worshippers of Nataraja still." Perhaps we are all worshippers of Nataraja. For the Dance of Shiva is an aesthetic summing-up of an Indian view of life that lights up the deeps of the creative process.

(*Courtesy* A.I.R., Madras)

II

ANANDA COOMARASWAMY—A PRE-CENTENNIAL TRIBUTE

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy is a name that means many things to many people. To his innumerable admirers in many lands, he was that unique combination of a brilliant scientist and a man of letters. To his colleagues at the Boston Museum, he was a perceptive art historian and a key participant in the East-West cultural dialogue. "Few scholars in any field" observed Walter Muir Whitehill in his *Centennial History of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, "have thought more profoundly or written more prolifically than Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. He was physically and intellectually a unique ornament to the Museum of Fine Arts for three decades". Besides being a celebrated scholar, he was one of the most gifted writers of our time. His translations and commentaries are among the most deeply satisfying of any written in English during the twentieth century. If Ananda Coomaraswamy had written nothing but *A New Approach to the Vedas*, his reputation as a man of letters would be secure. For this work, modestly described by Coomaraswamy as "an essay in the exposition of Vedic ideas by means of a translation and a commentary in which the resources of the universal tradition are taken for granted", represents a permanent contribution to English literature.

Several critics have noted that there are four Coomaraswamys: the youthful director of the Mineralogical Survey of Ceylon who not merely mapped out the geology of

Sri Lanka, but also pioneered the study of *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, the authentic art critic who was instrumental in opening up the cultural frontiers of Indian Nationalism; the world's most outstanding interpreter of Indian and Buddhist aesthetics; and finally the exponent of the Perennial Philosophy. It is true that these appellations signify the different stages of his career; yet they reinforce the essential unity of his work and of his aesthetic sensibility in the ultimate analysis. Indeed, this unity was achieved through a lifetime of aesthetic endeavour. For Coomaraswamy's early life and work straddled the departments of geology and art criticism. Subsequently he became the Curator of Oriental Art to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. And in the process of deploying his polymathic interests in the service of the Boston Museum, this Curator of Oriental Art almost effortlessly became the Curator of the tradition of perennial philosophy.

Coomaraswamy's mind was a perpetual chrestomathy which synthesized the different confluences of art, religion and literature, into a prose of artistic significance. Here is a masterly exposition of the nature of Buddhist art which catches the moment of the Buddhist aesthetic imagination at the peak of its wholeness. " The Buddha is invariably represented iconographically as supported by a lotus, his feet never touching any physical or local earth ..... The ultimate support of the lotus can also be represented as a stem identical with the axis of the universe, rooted in a universal depth, and inflorescent at all levels of reference: and if in Brahminical art this stem springs from the navel of Narayana, the central ground of the Godhead recumbent on the face of the waters, and bears in its flowers the figure of Brahma (with whom the Buddha is virtually identified) the universality of this

symbolism is sufficiently evident in the Stem of Jesse and in the symbolic representation of the Christian *Theotokos* by the rose."

Of equal significance is Coomaraswamy's interpretation of the dancing Shiva. However, it is not possible to entirely agree with Coomaraswamy that the concept of Nataraja is "a synthesis of science, religion and art". Coomaraswamy has argued that no artist of today, however great, could more exactly or more wisely create an image of that Energy which science must postulate behind all phenomena. At this stage, it would be interesting to contrast this metaphysical concept of Indian art with that of the scientific system of focused perspective in Renaissance Art. For example, one could consider Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. The receding lines on the walls, floor and ceiling not only constitute the third dimension but converge to one point which is focused on the head of Christ. Here is a unique synthesis of science, religion and art. And the figure of Christ is in itself a project essay in geometrical perfection. Thus it is clear that this figure of focused perspective, is unlike the Nataraja which projects itself as an artistic image in a metaphysical setting. As Coomaraswamy himself commented: "How supremely great in power and grace this dancing image must appear to all those who have striven in plastic forms to give expression to their intuition of Life."

The breadth and polymathic nature of Coomaraswamy's writings have spanned geology, art history, aesthetics, sociology, religions, civilizations, even time and eternity. His impeccable scholarship is synthesized in works such as *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, *The Dance of Shiva*, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, *Rajput Painting*, *Hinduism*

and Buddhism, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* and *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*. However, his polyvalent genius can be perceived in such major works as *The transformation of Nature in Art*, *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought*, *A New Approach to the Vedas*, *Time and Eternity* as well as in the shorter ones like *Recollection, Indian and Platonic*, *On the One and Only Transmigrant* and *Two Passages in Dante's* Paradiso.

The Coomaraswamy corpus is truly impressive. Interestingly, the nature of Coomaraswamy's achievement in the field of art critcism recalls the shaping of the Auden sensibility in the field of modern English poetry. For the relationship between the earlier revolutionary poetry of Auden and his later theological poetry is reminiscent of Coomaraswamy's migration from the state of Indian Nationalism into the shores of the Perennial Philosophy. And just as Auden's poetics flashed through *Beowulf* and *Troilus and Criseyde* to the contemporary English poets, so was Coomaraswamy's aesthetic imagination shaped by works ranging from *Sir Gawaine and the Greene Knight*, *Shakespeare's Plays* and *Paradise Lost* to Ashvagosha's *Buddha-Carita*, *Lankavatara Sutra* and Anandavardhana's *Dhvanyaloka*. Again Coomaraswamy's contributions to the traditional theory of literature derived from the perennial streams of literary symbolism, aesthetic sensibility and aphoristic insight, entitle him to be ranked among the major figures in the history of literary criticism. To cite an example, Prof. L. C. Knights's suggestive essay *King Lear as Metaphor* links Coomaraswamy's gloss on Hsieh Ho's concept of "Yun" in *The Transformation of Nature in Art* to the central thesis of Prof. Martin Foss's seminal work *Symbol and Metaphor in Human Experience*. As Prof. Knights has shown, Coomaraswamy's comparison

of the Indian "dhvani" with the Chinese "Yun" not only suggests the concept of reverberation but also highlights the metaphoric process defined by Martin Foss as "a process of tension and energy". For Coomaraswamy's profoundly original interpretation of "dhvani" as the verbal noun "sounding" rather than the noun "sound" is present both in *Dhvanyaloka* and in Chinese aesthetics. And the appositeness of this concept resulting from the energy to hold in tension the apprehension of meanings in *King Lear* to Coomaraswamy's explication of "an echoing in the heart of the hearer" is a key to Prof. Knights's understanding of King Lear as "a moving image of life.....that sets in motion those powers of apprehension through which we simultaneously become aware of, and make our world".

It is a question of some nicety to fix the frontier between the earlier Coomaraswamy and the later Coomaraswamy. One might perhaps regard *A New Approach to the Vedas* as a starting point of the later Coomaraswamy—the Coomaraswamy of the Perennial Philosophy. And he has viewed the Veda in its wider sense which naturally includes the Upanishads. Here is a sample from his translation of a section of the *Brahadaranyaka Upanishad:*

> "Twain are these, the Sheen and the Sacrifice-that-is-the-Horse (asvamedha). Yet again they are One Angel, even Death (mrtyu). He who knows this, forfends mortality (punar mrtyu), death (mrtyu) gets him not, Death (mrtyu) becomes himself, of those Angels he becomes the unity."

Surely an exquisitely nuanced piece of translation, breathlessly ecstatic and yet so tautly disciplined, that it appears to be carved out of marble.

Coomaraswamy knew with Sankara that "there is no other means of attaining complete and final deliverance except knowledge". This belief can best be understood when taken in conjunction with his exposition of the perennial tradition. For his exposition of the Perennial Philosophy is not an eclectic compromise, but a creative synthesis that conserved and transcended the influences of luminous minds like Meister Eckhart, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine and Ruysbroeck, in an architectonic value system of singular beauty.

(*Courtesy* A.I.R., Madras)

III

ANANDA COOMARASWAMY

As An Interpreter of Indian Art

"Today, if India takes her due rank as a first class artistic power, it is in large measure owing to Coomaraswamy." So wrote Sir William Rothenstein. Indeed Ananda Coomaraswamy's was an aesthetic view of life. In fact he gave an aesthetic orientation to the concept of Indian freedom. Actually his *Essays in National idealism* and *Art and Swadeshi* constituted artistic India's 'Declaration of Independence'. And that aesthetic movement inspired by Coomaraswamy linked the two master-spirits of India—Tagore and Gandhi.

The worship of beauty is at once the motivation and message of Coomaraswamy's attitude to Indian art. And Coomaraswamy's fame as an interpreter of Indian art rests on his contribution to three different types of work. First, as an exponent of the philosophical aspects as well as the dramatic techniques of the Indian dance. Second, as an influence on Hindu and Buddhist iconographic studies. Third, as an art critic whose artistic and scholarly interests ranged from the technical and theoretical aspects of Indian painting to Tagore's paintings. Significantly enough, Coomaraswamy's contribution to Indian art extended over the whole of his life, and is basic both as a means of organizing his other interests and as a reflection of them.

Conveying an aesthetic sensibility, a metaphysical point of view and a sense of the sublime, *The Dance of Shiva*

is one of Coomaraswamy's finest essays. He saw in The Dance of Shiva an aesthetic expression of a creative power which " could discover a mode so expressive of fundamental rhythm and so profoundly significant and inevitable " as well as a metaphysical focus of an image of reality. Again Cocmaraswamy played an important role in the rediscovery of the Indian dance. In fact, Nandikesvara's *Abhinaya Darpana* or *The Mirror of Gesture* which was translated by Ananda Coomaraswamy and G. K. Duggirala had greatly contributed to a revival of interest in the art of Indian dancing during the second decade of this century.

Nandikesvara's *Abhinaya Darpana* or *The Mirror of Gesture* is not merely an excellent handbook of dramatic technique but also a work of art. For Nandikesvara possessed the kind of artistic imagination which could transform a mere dictionary of gesture into a series of memorable aesthetic experiences. Here is a sensitive summing-up of the aesthetic vision of the Indian dance in one unforgettable paragraph: " The song should be sustained in the throat; its meaning must be shown by the hands; the mood (bhava) must be shown by the glances; rhythm (tala) is marked by the feet. For wherever the hand moves, there the glances follow; where the glances go, the mind follows; where the mind goes, the mood follows; where the mood goes, there is the flavour (rasa)."

Drawing upon his encyclopaedic knowledge of Indian culture, he was the first modern scholar to understand the significance of Indian dancing as well as the nature of Indian painting in their wider perspectives. Here it is worth stressing that Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam* is not only a scholar's delight but also meant for the stage. The

following example as interpreted by Coomaraswamy, illuminates the permanent and universal relationships between Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam* and Nandikesvara's *Abhinaya Darpana*[1]. " 'Mounting a Car' is to be shown as follows: The knees are to be raised, the leg being bent and lifted, so that the knee is level with the chest, and there held; and then the same is done with the other foot."

To cite another example, the following translation rendered by Coomaraswamy brings out the vital connection between the visual aesthetics of the eighteenth-century representation of the *Ragini Madhu-Madhavi* and Hindi poetry:

" The sweet, sweet rumbling of thunder is heard,
flashes of lightning light up the sky,
Birds are disporting with many notes, the princess
beholding, stands there delighted.
Her body blossoms like a flower for the meeting with
her darling, she stands entranced
Dreaming of her lord's embrace, there is bliss in her
heart."[2]

Indeed[3] as Lady honeysweet leaps towards the pavilion, a peacock screams its way in her direction. At this point, she raises her arm in a state of excitement. For the peacock is a symbol of the lover in Hindi poetry.

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[1] *The Mirror of Gesture*—Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara, translated into English by Ananda Coomaraswamy and Gopala Krishnayya Duggirala, page 5, Munshi Manoharlal, Delhi, Rs. 35. 1977.

[2] *Indian Painting* By M. S. Randhawa and J. K. Galbraith, Oxford & I. B. H. Publishing C.P., 1968, page 84.

[3] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Catalogue of the Indian Collections in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: Part V, Rajput Painting, (Cambridge, May 1926) pp. 91-92.

Coomaraswamy extended his range of investigations to the fascinating domains of those "wondrous things" known as the Yakshas. Actually his two volume study entitled *Yakshas*[4] with its vast range of archaeological, literary and mythological evidence, is a monumental contribution to the study of Yaksha iconography. Here it is well to note five different aspects of Coomaraswamy's scholarly and literary impact as an art critic. First, his studies in Yaksha, Brahminical and Buddhist Iconography, exercised a considerable influence on scholars like T. A. Gopinatha Rao and J. N. Banerjea. Second, through Coomaraswamy the *Nataraja* image profoundly influenced the mind of Rodin. And Rodin's aesthetic response to the Nataraja image is reminiscent of Goethe's lyric on Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam*, but at a different level. Third, Coomaraswamy's essay on *The Dance of Shiva* inspired the publication of Dr. G. S. Arundale's singularly interesting work *The Lotus Fire* which is a study in symbolic yoga. Fourth, the general outline of Coomaraswamy's theory underlying *Rajput Painting* still holds in an examination of the nature of Rajput art, although new definitions and assessments have been provided by art critics like H. Goetz, Eric Dickinson, M. S. Randhawa and B. N. Goswamy. Fifth, the architectonic quality of Coomaraswamy's exposition of Indian art—which can be perceived in the *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*—has set a compelling pattern for his successors like Dr. Stella Kramrisch and Dr. V. S. Agrawala.

Coomaraswamy dealt with the meaning of Indian art, the philosophical symbolism which is its distinguishing characteristic and the absence of the naturalism which

[4] *Yakshas* by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Part I & II, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi 1971, Rs. 75.00.

informs European art, in his philosophical work on *The Transformation of Nature in Art* as well as in his technical essays such as *The Technique and Theory of Indian Painting*. In Europe also the representation of the human form is not an end in itself. As Leonardo da Vinci emphasized in one of his notebooks, "that figure is most laudable which by its action best expresses the passion which animates it". Again he noted that a sophisticated painter ought to know anatomy. In fact, the memorable quality of the fresco of the Last Supper at Milan relies no less upon Leonardo's religious passion, than upon his use of the anatomical form, subtle chiaroscuro and aerial perspective. But the canons and conventions of Indian art are different. And Coomaraswamy argued in his essay on *The Technique and Theory of Indian Painting* that "The Indian artist sees indeed ideally, but he does not idealize, he imitates. He does not draw according to his taste but from the intellectual image; not 'knowing what he likes' but linking what he knows.....The Indian artist painted in the express likeness of what he saw 'as if in a mirror', and yet not such a 'looking-glass image' as we see in the mirror..... That art is thus essentially an intellectual experience, which view is also presupposed in the unsatisfactory word 'aesthetic', for which, there is no Sanskrit equivalent; but it cannot be distinguished from the view of art that prevailed in Europe throughout the Middle ages and of which full account must be taken by every serious student of Byzantine or Romanesque". In this way, he laid the foundations of what may be termed as the new discipline of comparative aesthetics.

During the first decade of this century, Coomaraswamy who was primarily concerned with the rivival of painting

in Bengal, rendered some of Tagore's poems into English. Here it is worth mentioning that Coomaraswamy and Sir J. C. Bose had perceived the beauty of Tagore's original compositions in Bengali, long before he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. Again, several decades later, Coomaraswamy underscored the significance of another facet of Tagore's genius-Tagore as a painter: "The poetry reveals nothing of the poet's personality though it establishes his status. But the painting is an intimacy comparable to the publication of private correspondence. The manner is as varied as the theme, and this despite the fact that all pictures are done with a pen, usually the back of a fountain-pen, and coloured with inks or tints.....This is art.....Without ulterior motives, truly innocent, like the creation of the universe."

Coomaraswamy's later writings—*The Transformation of Nature in Art*, *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought*, *A New Approach to the Vedas*, *Elements of Buddhist Iconography* and *Time and Eternity*—demonstrated that the various symbols and rites distributed over the world—express the same figures of thought in a truly universal setting. His study of the various religions made him understand that every religion "is one among others" viewed historically. For Coomaraswamy, a profound study of another's religion confirmed the universality of his own faith. And in his own case, it made him equate the lotus of Indian and Buddhist aesthetics with the rose of Christian theology.

(*Courtesy* A. I. R., Madras)

IV

ANANDA COOMARASWAMY

As an Interpreter of Buddhist Art and Aesthetics

Far back down the corridor of the centuries we perceive the serene figure of the Buddha like an image in a shrine, encrusted with myths, legends and traditions. But even these owe their aesthetic significance to the luminosity within; to the sublime personality that, after twenty-five centuries illumines our imagination with the brilliance of a supernova star. For a double perspective informs the aesthetics of Buddhism. Indeed the nature of the personality of the Buddha is immanent and at the same time transcendent. And thereby are resolved both the Buddha and the lotus, history and aesthetic consciousness, the serene life and the artistic form.

Carrying us back to the aniconic period of the Vedas, Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy highlights many similarities between passages in the mediaeval Christian mystics like St. Thomas, Meister Eckhart, Ruysbroeck and Boehme and passages in the literature of the Vedas, Upanishads and the Gita, in his profoundly illuminating work such as *A New Approach to the Vedas*, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* and *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*. And with his gift for unifying perception, Dr. Coomaraswamy moves expertly through the five references which symbolize Buddhist thought in his *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*—the Tree of Life, the Earth-lotus, the Word-Wheel, the Lotus-Throne and the Fiery Pillar—to offer us the quint-essence of

Buddhist aesthetics:[1] "Buddhist symbolism, far from being an isolated language, is proper to the one great tradition which has persisted from the Vedic or a pre-Vedic period until now. The lotus denotes ontologically a firm establishment amongst the possibilities of existence, denotes a birth and manifestation primarily in the intelligible, or also and consequently in the sensible, world; while it denotes ethically, detachment as of one who is in the world but out of it. The throne of deity is a lotus-throne from the foregoing points of view; as impartite and immovable, it is adamantine; as royal, it is a lion-throne. The Tathagata, Buddha, seated on such a throne, standing on such a pedestal, affirms an infinite negation, a sable stillness against which his golden person shines resplendent, unconfined by any form, but omniform."

The intersection of the absolute and the relative, with its aesthetic commentary on the human situation, can be perceived in the concept of associating the lotus with the Buddha. Just as the lotus symbolizes the creativity of the Cosmic Being in Hindu mythology, so does it reflect the wisdom of Nirvana in Mahayanist Buddhist aesthetics. Here it is worth noting that just as Mahayanist Buddhist art borrowed its metaphysical symbolism from the Hindu tradition, so did Hindu art derive its anthropomorphism from Buddhist art. Indeed, unlike the plain and repetitive art of the Hinayana, the Mahayanist aesthetic perspective became inclusive enough to comprehend a variety of concepts and influences such as an ancient aniconic tradition described by Coomaraswamy as the aniconic Vedic style, the Gita ideal of the Seated Yogi, the Philosophy of the universal compassion of the Buddha, the Greek

[1] *Elements of Buddhist Iconography* by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1972, page 59.

perspective of beauty, the metaphysics of 'the Void', the Tantrik nature of Lamaistic art and the delicacy of Taoist art. And in a passage that corroborates Coomaraswamy's view of the Buddhist lotus, Schuon writes as follows: "The lotus, supporting the Buddha, is the nature of things, the calm and pure fatality of its illusion and finally of its disappearance; but it is also the luminous centre of Maya whence arises Nirvana become man."[2]

As the centuries rolled on, the lotus-throne became an important element of the Buddhist Iconography. In fact the lotus became increasingly significant in the wake of an almost alchemical transmutation of the simple design of the Hinayana into the complex aesthetics of the Mahayana. For example, according to the Mahayanist aesthetics, the smallest particles of the Universe of Buddha's compassion are present in the form of innumerable bodhisattvas enthroned on lotuses. To cite another example, the *prajnaparamita*, signifying transcendental wisdom, can be identified with Queen Maya, the mother of the historical Buddha who is surrounded by lotuses. And as the lotus of the Dhamma travelled over Tibet, Ceylon, Java, China and Japan, India came to be cherished as the land of the lotus-blossom.

In order to arrive at a balanced perspective of the aesthetics of Buddhism, the art historian must step back out of the range of the details of Buddhist art history; he must also get beyond the pages of mere scholarship to grasp the full significance of the aesthetics of Buddhism. This is the process through which Coomaraswamy's

[2] In the Tracks of Buddhism by Frithj of Schuon (translated from the French by Marco Pallis), George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1968, page 20.

genius has expressed itself. His interpretation is, in the best sense of the term, modern, for it sees with the evolutionary eye the origin of the Buddha image along the surface of life; and it also sees with the inner eye the accumulation of legends that lifts the mind towards an intuitive understanding of the deeper messages of Hindu-Buddhist aesthetics.

"It becomes impossible" wrote Coomaraswamy in his essay on 'The Origin of the Buddha Image' to treat the phrase 'Greek origin of the Buddha image'[3] as representing anything more than a rhetorical misuse of language; if art of the Gandharan School, as its students admit, is half Indian, art of the Kusana and Gupta periods in the Ganges Valley is altogether Indian, for it deals with the same ideas, and uses a plastic language that is in direct continuity with that of the preceding centuries." However, the problem of determining the origin of the Buddha image must be understood at different levels of aesthetic perception. For a Buddha image, whether Gandharan-Greek, Mathura-early Indian or Gupta-classical Indian, reflects the same tranquillity of the Spirit awakened to Itself. Again the creations of Buddhist art comprise two poles, the first being the Gandharan images while the second constitute the Japanese paintings. Actually the Gandharan image is important in the history of art on two counts. For the artistic process of using the secular idiom of the Roman West in an attempt to express the spirit of Buddhism began in the holy land of Gandhara. Furthermore, the Gandharan perspective derived from the head of Apollo, had contributed a dimension of Greek beauty to Buddhist art. Similarly the

[3] *The Origin of the Buddha Image*, vol. IX, No. 4. The Art Bulletin, New York University, June 1927, page 324.

tenth century Japanese paintings of Amida (Amitabha), which were partly inspired by the techniques of Taoist art, had introduced an element of Japanese daintiness into Buddhist art.

Dante, whom Coomaraswamy regarded as a great exponent of the Tradition, observed: "He who would paint a figure, if he cannot be it, cannot paint it." Indeed this traditional point of view is reflected in a similar observation made by Coomaraswamy: "The Buddha image came into being because a need had been felt for it, and not because a need had been felt for 'art'". Again whether or not one accepts Coomaraswamy's understanding of the formality of traditional art in its entirety, one can admire the imaginative breath of view that be brought to the interpretation of the nature of Buddhist art. For instance, Coomaraswamy's interpretation of a mere reference to the emigration of Udayana's Buddha image in Chavanne's *Archaeological Mission* deepens the meaning of Buddhist concept of a 'flight through the air'; "The legend does not refer to the physical transference of a material image, but to the universality of an immutable form that can be seen as well as by the Khotanese as by the Indian contemplative; where the historian of art would see what is called the 'influence' of Indian or Central Asian art, the legend asserts an independent imagination of the same form. It will be seen that we have not had in view to explain away the miracle; but to point out that the marvel is one of interior disposition; and that the power of aerial flight is nothing like an aeroplane's but has to do with the extension of consciousness to other than physical levels of references and in fact, to the 'summit of contingent being'." Thus his interpretation succeeds in perceiving the interrelations between traditional concepts and modern scholarship.

The fundamental significance of Coomaraswamy's interpretation lies in its appeal to men to go beyond textual, critical analysis to deeper meanings. Beyond the icons of Buddhist art is the Buddhist concept of '*samvega*' or the power of aesthetic shock, enabling man to understand the aesthetics of the Buddha-lotus equation as well as gain an aesthetic insight into the nature of reality. And he sets forth this idea in the concluding paragraph of his perceptive essay on *The Nature of Buddhist Art*:[4] "One must have learnt that an access to reality cannot be had by making a choice between matter and spirit as things unlike in all respects, but rather by seeing in things material and sensible a formal likeness to spiritual prototypes of which the senses can give no direct report. It is not a question of religion versus science, but of a reality on different levels of reference, or better, perhaps, of different orders of reality, not mutually exclusive."

(*Courtesy* A.I.R., Gauhati)

[4] "The Nature of Buddhist Art" included in *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought*, by Ananda Coomaraswamy, Luzac & Co., London, 1946, page 193.

V

ANANDA COOMARASWAMY

As an Interpreter of Rajput Painting

Sixty-one years[1] ago, Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy awoke one morning in London to find that his publication entitled *Rajput Painting* ** *— an account of the Hindu paintings of Rajastan and the Punjab Himalayas from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century described in their relation to 'contemporary thought'*, was an immediate success. Indeed, it became and has remained, an authentic classic of Indian art history.

Although Coomaraswamy was a versatile and prolific writer, his interpretative work on *Rajput Painting*, is his most significant contribution to Indian art history. True, long before Coomaraswamy published his original essay on *Rajput Painting* in the Burlington Magazine in 1912, certain art critics had already written on some aspects of Rajput art—a contribution to architecture by J. Ferguson, an occasional piece on painting by Hendley and essays on the decorative arts by Sir George Birdwood and Percy Brown. However, these art critics mistook surface qualities and expressions for fundamentals and universals. Naturally their inability to comprehend the attitude and level of vision attained by the Rajput artists accounted for shallow understanding. And in the process of identifying Rajput

[1] —this talk was broadcast in 1977.

** *Rajput Painting* by Ananda Coomaraswamy, vol. I—Text, vol. II—Plates, Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1916.

Painting with a tradition different from that of the Mughals, Coomaraswamy discovered the actual headwaters of the stream of Rajput art.

Coomaraswamy's *Rajput Painting* is the work of a pioneer, which reveals a new world of romance and mysticism, heroism and chivalry. Not surprisingly, it inspired several informative publications by O. C. Gangoly, N. C. Mehta, J. C. French, L. Binyon, H. Goetz, W. G. Archer, Eric Dickinson, Karl Khandalawala, M. S. Randhawa, B. N. Goswamy and several others. For instance, the importance of Archer's work is derived from his accent on the styles and centres of Pahari painting. Equally important is the publication of Eric Dickinson and Karl Khandalawala which highlights the romantic lyricism of the Kishengarh School. Similarly Randhawa's focus is on the brilliancy of colours which constitutes the peculiar appeal of the Basholi painting.

It is easy to be unfair to a pioneer like Coomaraswamy. It is easier to stir up the old controversies about 'styles' and 'bias'. Yet, interestingly, Coomaraswamy's *Rajput Painting* has not become outdated amid the flood of 'new material' pertaining to the Rajasthani, Basholi, Kangra and related styles, that appeared over the decades. The fact that Mughal influences have played an important part the evolution of the Rajasthani style is hardly relevant in an assessment of Coomaraswamy's contribution to the study of Rajput Painting. Indeed Coomaraswamy had other fish to fry. For he was basically concerned with the study of Rajput Painting as a part of the mediaeval background of the history of ideas.

Coomaraswamy had that rarest of scholarly gifts, a mind which was at once sensitive and interdisciplinary. His

contributions to the study of Rajput painting over the years—the original work on *Rajput Painting*, Part V of the *Catalogue of the Indian Collections in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* which is devoted to Rajput Painting and the section dealing with Rajput painting in the *History of Indian* and *Indonesian Art*—reflect a wide spectrum of moods and insights. Here is an evocation of *Cowdust* which translates Krishna from the merely mortal realm of time and place into an immutable product of the Vaishnava imagination. " In the Museum of Fine Arts Collections ", wrote Coomaraswamy, " There is no more lovely painting of the Kangra School than the well-known *Cowdust* where Krishna is seen returning with the herds and herdsmen to Brindavan at sunset ..... He is an Orphic power whose music charms and beguiles all nature, animate and inanimate alike, and the very rivers stay their courses to hear it ..... In innumerable paintings we find varied combinations of the theme." Again Coomaraswamy's exposition of the *Hindi Ragmala Texts* reveals a new aesthetic insights into the nature of Rajput aesthetics. He defines the Ragmala as " profoundly imagined pictures of human passion". In these Ragmala paintings, with their interweaving of mood and suggestion, as colours and design in a piece of embroidery, we have an authentic fragment of fine art. For example, the aim and method of the Bundi painting *Madhu Madhavi* are expressed in Coomaraswamy's translation of a *Ragamala* text. To cite another example, the Bundi painting depicting the lovers' dalliance can be visualized in the *Raga Malkaus.*

At least three aesthetic reasons exist for calling the book a classic. First, there is a vernal freshness here which forecasts its more sensitive use in Coomaraswamy's next book, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* as the following

aesthetic response suggests: "What Chinese art achieved for landscape, is here accomplished for human love. Here, if never and nowhere else in the world, the Western Gates are opened wide. The arms of lovers are about each other's necks, eye meets eye, the whispering *sakhis* speak of nothing else but the course of Krishna's courtship, the very animals are spell-bound by the sound of Krishna's flute and the elements stand still to hear the *ragas* and the *raginis*. This art is only concerned with the realities of life, above all, with passionate love-service, conceived as the means and symbol of all Union. If Rajput Art at first sight appears to lack the material charm of Persian pastorals, or the significance of Mughal portraiture, it more than compensates in tenderness and depth of feeling, in gravity and reverence."

Second, Coomaraswamy traces, with a revealing sensitivity as of a painter, the shimmeringly exquisite colour scheme in sky and valley, shrub and dewdrop and to his seeing eye the aesthetic inspiration of the Rajput paintings has its radiating point in Vaishnava mysticism. Here it is well to recall that Wordsworth wrote of that " inward eye which is the bliss of solitude " while reflecting upon the Ullswater daffodils. To see into the life of things is to enable the seeing eye to perceive an entire spectrum of beauty. Again just as Shelley perceived a ray of what he termed as " a light of laughing flowers ", so is Coomaraswamy's book on *Rajput Painting* full of a passionate conviction that " the sound of Krishna's flute is the voice of Eternity heard by the dwellers in Time ". Furthermore, it would be a mistake to dissociate Coomaraswamy's interpretation from his historical method in general, for it is the way in which he transcends the limitations of men's existence in an attempt to understand the aesthetic signifi-

cance of Vaishnava mysticism, that his greatness as an interpreter of *Rajput Painting* lies. Above all, Coomaraswamy is aware of the haunting presence of Krishna that moves behind the thought and feeling of the Rajput painters, and communicates this aesthetic awareness in sensitive prose : " In Rajput art it is not through landscape or through animal painting that the highest universality is reached. There is no such philosophic interpretation of Nature, as we recognize in Chinese interpretations of mist and mountain, dragon and tiger. The universalism of Vaishnava art is attained in another way ; its philosophic language is that of human love ; its pair of opposites—Mist and Mountain, Yin and Yang, Being and Becoming, Rest and Energy, Spirit and Matter—are typified by Man and Woman ..... In this convention of its own so different from and complementary to that of Chinese Art, the Vaishnava art of Hindusthan is none the less the Indian equivalent of Ch'an or Zen Buddhistic culture of the Far East. Each on its own way achieves the union of Nirvana or Samsara, renunciation and pleasure, religion with the world, Man with Nature."

This brings me to my last point. It speaks of the universality of Coomaraswamy's genius that he, the historian of *Rajput Painting* should look beyond the frontiers of Indian culture. His enchanting descriptions of Rajput Paintings, which are expressed in meticulously chosen flicks of words, remind one of Watteau and possibly Blake. Again his translations bring out the similarities between the Rajput lyric poets and the Troubadours. Similarly the Rajput mystics have as their comrades St. John of the Cross, Francis Thompson, Rainer Maria Rilke and others who constitute the Christian hierarchy of immortal song. Thus, in the pages of Coomaraswamy's *Rajput Painting*, one

looks beyond India and across Europe, to that timeless Holy Land of aesthetic experience which is memorably re-created in the following paragraph : " The typical examples of Rajput Painting, like every other expression of mystical intuition, have for us this lesson that what we cannot discover at home and in familiar events, we cannot discover anywhere. The Holy Land is the land of our own experience. All is in all : and if beauty is not apparent to us in the well-known, we shall not find it in things that are strange and far-away."

All in all, Coomaraswamy's book on *Rajput Painting* must be placed among the major works of Indian art history and criticism.

(*Courtesy* A.I.R., Gauhati)

VI

ANANDA COOMARASWAMY AS A SCIENTIST

Just as the English Man of Letters Horace Walpole added a new word ' serendipity ' to 18th century English prose, so did the Sri Lanka-born geologist Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy contribute two mineralogical terms—serindibite and thorianite—to the 20th century dictionary of geology. Indeed, the publication of Walpole's fairy tale *The Three Princes of Serindib* had unveiled the vistas of serendipity. ' As their highnesses travelled ' so Walpole observed, " they were always making discoveries, by accident or sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of". Obviously, any discussion of the importance of serendipity in scientific research necessitates an understanding of what the term ' serendib ' means to the scientist. No longer in actual use the term ' serendib ' is an Arabic modification of ' Simhaladvipa ' which is the old Sanskrit name for the island of Sri Lanka. To the scientist, however, it means a discovery that can result from a happy combination of chance and a trained mind.

In his delightful essay entitled *Gains from Serendipity*, the distinguished American physiologist Prof. Walter B. Cannon argued that " a chance discovery involves both the phenomenon to be observed and the appreciative, intelligent observer". And he listed some of the more impressive gains from serendipity such as the discoveries of the circulation of blood, insulin and penicillin. However, the prior-Coomaraswamy discovery of ' serendibite ' is the most impressive gain from serendipity. For it not only fulfilled the twin criteria of chance and alertness, but

also immortalized the country which inspired the tale of *The Three Princes of Serendib.*

Distinguished scientist, eminent savant of ancient cultures ranging from Vedic ontology to Buddhist aesthetics, historian of Mediaeval Sinhalese Art and of Indian and Indonesian Art, an authority on a variety of disciplines such as Rajput Painting and Buddhism and an interpreter of the Perennial Wisdom, Coomaraswamy was a modern Renaissance figure. Indeed his ability to switch from science to art history, and again from art history through religion on to metaphysics revealed an impressive many sidedness that was possible only to one whose mind was cast in the mould of the renaissance and Post-Renaissance artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo and Goethe. And though Coomaraswamy will be considered here as a scientist, it is important to remember that his artistic and scholarly interests led him to pioneer the disciplines of comparative aesthetics and comparative iconography, as well as make significant contributions to comparative literature and the perennial philosophy.

Born in 1877, Coomaraswamy was educated at Wycliffe College and University College, London. At a very early age, he developed an enthusiasm for geological studies. In fact, Coomaraswamy contributed an article on *The Geology of Doverow Hill* to his school magazine, *The Wycliffe Star* in 1895. Subsequently he entered University College, London, in 1897, and obtained a first class B.Sc. (Honours) degree in Geology and Botany in 1900. To this period belongs his debut as an independent scientific investigator. And his first formal scientific paper *On Sri Lanka Rocks and Graphite* was published in the August 1900 issue of the *Quarterly Journal* of the Geological Society of London.

For nearly four years—1903 to 1906—Coomaraswamy was in charge of the Mineralogical Survey of Sri Lanka. In fact his scientific work was concerned, in one way or another, with what is called the geology of Sri Lanka. He not only published geological maps as well as several papers on the crystalline limestones and rocks of Sri Lanka, but also visualized the economic possibilities of the mineral resources of the Island like graphite, mica, iron ores, manganese ores and varieties of corundum. Again his masterly Administration Reports covered a wide range of geological, mineralogical and petrological subjects. Indeed the interdisciplinary nature of Coomaraswamy's scientific work—based on his Administration Reports and scientific papers—was well expressed by Mr. Frank Dawson Adams in 1929 issue of the *Canadian Journal of Research*. And 'in these Administration Reports', Mr. Adams wrote, 'Coomaraswamy has given the fullest and most accurate accounts which have appeared of the geology of the ancient crystalline rocks of Sri Lanka, and most of this information is also to be found distributed through certain papers by him in other publications. . . . . Coomaraswamy having visited all parts of Sri Lanka had a much wider acquaintance with the rocks of the Island than any of his predecessors. He states that the term gneiss used in the sense of a rock having a 'gneissic structure' is applicable to most of the rocks of the island. If the term 'granulite' is used, as it is by many writers to designate a gneiss containing garnet, a large proportion of the crystalline rocks of the Island ought to be termed granulites. He also mentions that the Crystalline rocks of Sri Lanka belong, in large part at least, to the "Charnockite Series" which Holland described in southern India. . . . . 'He has contributed also many valuable papers on the mineralogy of Sri Lanka'.

Along with G. T. Prior, Coomaraswamy discovered a new borosilicate of alumina and lime with magnesia and alkalies at Gangapitiya near Ambakotte, which is about 12 miles east of Kandy, in 1902. This blue mineral which can be found only in Sri Lanka, occurs in small crystals in diopside rock at junction of limestone and granulite. Incidentally, it is worth recalling here that Pierre and Marie Curie had isolated ' polonium ' the first ever element to be discovered by radiochemical analysis in 1898. And just as the Poland-born scientist Marie Curie dubbed the new element ' polonium '—the name that perpetuates Poland—so did the Serindib-born geologist term the new mineral " Serindibite " in order to confer enduring fame upon ' Serindib '.

Coomaraswamy's greatest contribution to geology was his discovery of " thorianite ". Originally discovered by Coomaraswamy in the Bambarabotuwa district of Sri Lanka in 1904, thorianite can also be found in the black river and beach sands of Alaska, Madagascar and Siberia. And paradoxically enough Coomaraswamy made this discovery in the process of checking up on the findings of a colleague. Actually Dr. W. D. Holland had wrongly identified a quantity of a heavy black mineral occurring in cubic crystals as pitchblende or uraninite. However, Coomaraswamy's preliminary examination showed that it was a new mineral. Again he took the precaution of sending samples of this mineral to Sir William Crookes, Sir William Ramsay, Madam Curie's Laboratory, Paris and the Imperial Institute, London, for further chemical examination and analysis. These analyses confirmed Coomaraswamy's original discovery that it was a new mineral containing oxides of thorium and uranium. Here is Coomaraswamy's summary of his discovery in his

own words : " This newly discovered mineral, peculiar to Sri Lanka, is of great commercial importance owing to the use of thoria in the manufacture of incandescent gas mantles. It occurs in very heavy black cubic crystals at Bambarabotuwa, where over a ton has been obtained. It is valued at £ 600 sterling per ton. It is of great scientific interest too, on account of its chemical composition, one or more new elements being possibly present ; it contains also a large amount of occluded helium. Though radio-active, there is no more than a trace of radium present."

It was characteristic of Coomaraswamy's self-effacement that he called the new mineral ' thorianite ' instead of linking it with his own name. In fact several mineralogists had associated themselves with their discoveries such as Allanite, Fergusonite, Geikeilite and Baddeylite. Here one is reminded of the self-effacement of the celebrated American physicist Prof. Robert Millikan. Indeed, in 1925, Prof. Millikan had experimentally verified the hypothesis of the Austrian physicist Victor Hess that a radiation far more energetically significant than the most powerful emanations of radium was bombarding the earth from different directions in space. Naturally impressed, the *New York Times* editorialized on November 12, 1925 that this radiation could be termed *Millikan rays* in an attempt to associate them ' with a man of such fine and modest personality'. However, Millikan had modestly characterized them as ' Cosmic rays'.

The history of the gains from Serendipity reinforces the validity of Louis Pasteur's contention that ' chance favours the prepared mind'. Yet, in the ultimate analysis, it is possible to argue that serendipity is a creative combination of the different areas of scientific inter-relatedness rather

than an individual discovery. It is true that Max Planck worked out the quantum theory while investigating the radiation from black bodies. It is equally true that Rutherford arrived at the structure of the atom in the wake of his study of the properties of the alpha rays. However, one of the historic gains from serendipity was derived from the first phase of the interrelatedness of twentieth century science. For it inspired Niels Bohr to realize that some of the major scientific developments of the twentieth century such as Lord Rutherford's memorable work on alpha rays leading to the conclusion that a chemically inert element like helium is an important factor in the constitution of the atomic system of uranium and thorium and radium, Max Planck's theory of radiation as well as the investigations of great chemists—William Ramsay's discovery of the chemically inert gases like Helium, neon, argon, Krypton and Xenon, Otto Hahn's investigation of the radioactive decomposition of thorium resulting in the discovery of radio—thorium and meso-thorium and Madam Curie's celebrated work in isolating radium as well as deriving the properties of nuclear chemistry from pitchblenda—could all be synthesized into a theory of the atom.

Coomaraswamy was honoured both in England and elsewhere. He was elected a Fellow of the Geological and Linnean Societies of London and also received the D.Sc. of the London University in 1906. And he was particularly fortunate in that his work not only gave us two gains from serindipity—serindibite and thorianite—but also helped in raising the state of geology in ' Serindib ' to the status of a scientific discipline.

(*Courtesy* A.I.R., Madras)

VII

ANANDA COOMARASWAMY AS A MAN OF LETTERS

'An artist' observed Coomaraswamy, 'is not a special kind of man but every man is, or should be a special kind of artist'. An exponent the tradition in art, religion and philosophy he was also a modern scientist associated with the discoveries of thorianite and serendibite. The frame of his thought is traditional but the picture within the frame can be said to come close, sometimes, to the aesthetic experiences of philosophers, scientists and mathematicians as different as Sankara and Rutherford, Ashvagosha and G. H. Hardy. Behind these seeming paradoxes is a modern Renaissance figure whose creative achievements in the fields of modern science and perennial metaphysics, can be attributed to that tension of the mind which ultimately inheres in the human situation. For genius, ripeness is all; and he drew the main tension of his creativity from the clash between Mediaeval thought and the Renaissance mind. The result is a special kind of artistic synthesis. It is not an eclectic combination but that maturity of mind which is derived from the varieties of literary experience. Just as the quantum theory which postulates the relationship between different aspects of one and same physical process led Neils Bohr to arrive at an epistemological truth of the principle of complementarity, so did Coomaraswamy forge the traditional symbols and figures of thought into a sensitive idiom of modern English prose.

It is perhaps unnecessary to view the works of the early Coomaraswamy—*Essays in National Idealism* and *Art and*

Swadeshi—autobiographically, but behind them it is certainly possible to perceive Coomaraswamy's feeling for the arts and crafts of ancient and mediaeval India: "Where are the filmy muslins or the flower-woven silks with which we used to worship the beauty of Indian women, the brazen vessels from which we ate and drank, the carpets on which we trod with bare feet, or the pictures that revealed to us the love of Radha and the soul of the eternal snows?" Here is another significant sentence: "Mughal art reflects the actual world as the dream world of two great oriental cultures at the most dramatic moment of their contact..... The mind of the age—synthetic not merely eclectic—finds its truest expression in the character of a man like Akbar—cultiyated mind nourished alike by the streams of Persian and Indian thought." And equally sensitive is his assessment of Tagore: "He is Vaishnava and Vedantist in one, believing like Blake that man has no body distinct from his soul, and the five senses are the chief inlets of soul in this age."

The quality of Coomaraswamy's later writings touches all places and times, and moves likewise above time and place; and nowhere is this quality better revealed than in his interpretations of the Indian lotus and the Christian rose. Here Coomaraswamy made a subtle distinction between the '*Paroksa*' and '*pratyaksa*' use of terms. He pointed out that '*paroksa*' terms are "proper to Angels who are 'fond of' the symbolic": '*pratyakas*' language on the other hand, is "proper to man..... as individual..... who is 'fond of' the obvious..... ....." To cite an instance, the Sanskrit word '*puskara*' means the lotus flower on the '*pratyaksa*' level; it refers to something that can be aesthetically experienced. However, in terms of '*paroksa*' terminology, it constitutes

"the symbol and image of all spatial extension". Redefined in this way, these examples of symbolic imagery, gain a new dimension of aesthetic perception. More importantly, Coomaraswamy realized that the lotus of Indian and Buddhist aesthetics, is also the rose of Christian theology and is no less distinctively Western than Yeats' *Rose of all Roses* which exists not as a rose of the physical earth but as the transmitter of deeper meanings of Eliot's Lotus which is weighted with Eastern metaphysical associations. Interestingly enough, Elizabeth Drew discusses the connection of Eliot's lotus with the rose, the circle and the 'still point' as representations of the Mandala pattern in her book *T. S. Eliot : The Design of his Poetry*. And in the final analysis, it is clear that the content of Coomaraswamy's later writings is not that of an art critic, but of a seer who used the things of art such as the Indian lotus and the Christian rose for the purpose of the spirit.

In his essay "Adonis and the Alphabet", Aldous Huxley argued that Gertrude Stein's celebrated definition of a rose by-passes that experience which has been termed by Meister Eckhart as the experience of 'isness'. Indeed, as interpreted by Aldous Huxley, "a rose is a rose—plus is a rose—minus is a rose to the nth". And the following lines of Coomaraswamy's poem entitled *Body and Soul* not merely recall Blake but recapture something of the perennial 'isness' of sensible reality in a single exquisite phrase :

> "Adrift on such sea
> I am evermore free
> Dear branch of God's tree"

In order to interpret the traditions of sacred art, more than mere scholarship is necessary. "For the meaning of

symbols," stressed Coomaraswamy, "we must rely on the explicit statements of authoritative texts, on comparative usage, and on that of those who still employ the traditional symbols as the customary form of their thought and daily conversation". Actually what is required for the most authentic interpretation is the power of creative thinking in the spacious perspective of the tradition. Furthermore, Titus Burckhardt has explained in his *Sacred Art in East and West* that "a symbol is not merely a conventional sign. It manifests its archetype by virtue of a definite ontological law; as Coomaraswamy has observed, a symbol is in a certain sense that to which it gives expression. For this very reason traditional symbolism is never without beauty". And concerning the interpretation of sacred art, the American critic Howard Nemerov makes the following comment in his speculations 'On poetry and painting, with a thought of Music': "It will be worthwhile to remember here Coomaraswamy's demonstration that in traditions of sacred art, the Mediaeval Christian as much as the Hindu, painting was treated as Linguistic; the characters of iconography were dictated at least as much by the codified formulas of priesthoods as by any free observation of the visible world; which offers an answer, and a good one, to the question of how, in a world without photography, the features of gods and saviours become so quickly fixed and invariant."

In lines like the following in Yeats' poem entitled 'A Needle's Eye', the stream of time is lifted in the soaring imagination of the poet towards its source at both ends:

> "All the stream that's roaring by
> Came out of a needle's eye;
> Things unborn, things that are gone,
> From needle's eye still goad it on."

And this concept of time is elegantly philosophized in a passage from *Time and Eternity* that must be quoted at some length : ' The metaphysical doctrine simply contrasts time as a continuum with the eternity that is not in time and so cannot properly be called everlasting but coincides with the real present or now of which temporal experience is impossible. Here confusion only arises because for any consciousness functioning in terms of time and space, ' now ' succeeds ' now ' without interruption, and there seems to be an endless series of nows collectively adding upto ' time '. This confusion can be eliminated if we realize that none of these nows has any duration and that, as measures, all alike are zeros, of which a ' sum ' is unthinkable. It is a matter of relativity ; it is ' we ' who move, while the now is unmoved, and only seems to move —much as the sun seems to rise and set because the earth revolves.'

Apart from his other accomplishments, Coomaraswamy was an aesthetically satisfying translator. For instance he was successful in summoning a vocabulary that was aesthetically adequate for rendering a variety of compositions such as the *Poetic* (or *Elder*) *Edda* and the *Ragmala* poems into English. Again, he was even more successful in evoking the subtle moods of poets as different as Vidyapati, Surdas, Tagore and Iqbal. Further more, he was most successful as a translator of certain sections from the Vedas and Upanishads. Here it is necessary to note Coomaraswamy's use of the comparative method as an inter-disciplinary setting for the footnotes—a method that is derived from the credentials of comparative religion. Indeed, in his introduction to *A New Approach to the Vedas* Coomaraswamy wrote that " as for the Vedic and Christian Sources, each illuminates the other. And that

in itself is an important contribution to understanding". And his work entitled *A New Approach to the Vedas* is at once an authentic translation of certain Vedic and Upanishadic pieces of poetry as well as a perceptive essay in comparative religion.

Thus to understand Coomaraswamy's achievement as a man of letters, two fundamental concepts must be grasped. The first is that the tensional patterns of his prose and poetry are equilibrated in a stylistic framework which ranges from nostalgic writing and art criticism to an exposition of the Perennial Philosophy. And in criticism, he provided for the present generation a reinterpretation of certain insights in Indian and Buddhist aesthetics. This leads to the second concept : he used the resources of the English language to illuminate more complex traditions and cultures.

(*Courtesy* A.I.R., New Delhi)

For

MRS. DONA LOUISA COOMARASWAMY
(wife of Dr. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy and a dear friend)

and

DR. ANANDA KRISHNA COOMARASWAMY
(the son of my dear friend Mr. S. Durai Raja Singam)

who are no more

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MR. A. RANGANATHAN is not only well known as an art critic, science writer and political commentator, but also as a broadcaster on political, scientific, cultural and literary subjects. His articles have appeared in such prestigious journals as *Impact* (UNESCO, Paris), *Universitas* (Federal Republic of Germany), *The texas quarterly* (U.S.A), *The Minnesota Review* (U.S.A.) and *Hemisphere* (*Australia*). He has won several awards including the George Bernard Shaw Centenary Medal, the New Jersey Foundation prize for population studies and the M. N. Saha popular science prize. In particular, Mr. Ranganathan has made the life and works of Dr. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy as his life-study and the subject of a comprehensive and significant project. He has repeatedly broadcast, telecast, lectured and written studies on Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy, and his efforts were directly responsible for the issue of the Centenary stamp in 1977, in honour of the great scholar by the Government of India. Mr. Ranganathan has lectured on Coomaraswamy at the India International Centre, New Delhi; The National Museum, Colombo; Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi; and the Autonomous Postgraduate Centre, Tiruchirapalli. And he has contributed the chapter on Coomaraswamy to the volume of essays edited by *Prof. Donald Bishop* of *Washington State University*, which will be shortly brought out by *Wiley Eastern*, Delhi.

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