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Cultural Identity and the Viksit Bharat Ideal: A Study of the ‘Outlandish Figure’ Coomaraswamy’s Aesthetics

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Abstract

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), the author of more than 650 works (including books, papers, articles, reviews, monographs, etc.), is generally considered “a forbidding terrain” and an “outlandish figure” (Narsimhaiah 1) for students of literature. The life-trajectory of this partly-Sinhalese, partly-English, ancestrally Indian geologist, art-historian and critic runs across countries like Ceylon, England, India and America, yet orbits intellectually around Indian art and knowledge-systems.

In 1947, the year of India’s political swarajya, this advocate of ‘swarajya in ideas’ passed away before he could complete his desire to retire back to India from Boston. That the contemporary Indian intellectual galaxy failed to retain Coomaraswamy and publish him for Indian students, remains to be a fact. Writes Mrs. Coomaraswamy in her 1937 letter to Moni Bagchi: “When I was in India in 1935, I hoped that both Sahitya Academy and National Book Trust would come forward and propose a plan for presenting Coomaraswamy works at the prices Indian students can afford to pay. However, nothing of this sort happened. The few proposals that came were such that they bordered on the absurd.” (qtd in Bagchee 187)



All this he did because of his deep-rooted conviction that nations are created by poets and artists, not by merchants and politicians. It is art that could manifest deepest life principles to common man in an appealing manner. In K G Subramaniam's view, AKC's deep intellectual involvement with the cultural resurgence of India led to "an attitude of expository polemics on behalf of the East" (qtd in Dasgupta CDN 11). In identifying the inner structure of Indian intellectual tradition, evolved his weltanschauung of ancient Indian art and society as superior to the materialist Western culture of the modern time. He took up the mission of educating the Western opinion on the Orient, especially Indian art, at a time when Indian opinion was itself overcast by western attitudes.

The spirit of reawakening a sense of national identity, unity and mutual respect for one's culture is observed in AKC. He is among those rare geniuses who can "commend to an intelligent mind as most philosophers and historians cannot, not only the accessibility of a vital intellectual tradition..." AKC, who gave up the advantages of his study for interpreting and propagating the art of India, never wished to earn fame by writing 'popular' works; his target readers were intellectuals who were at a position to bring about a change. While Max Mueller and David Rhyes focused on interpreting Indian religious literature, Coomaraswamy admirably filled a significant void by dexterously interpreting Hindu and Buddhist art and aesthetics for the global audience. Coomaraswamy's body of work comprises various aspects that warrant in-depth and individual investigations. This paper claims his contribution quintessential in the revival of India's cultural identity, which in turn would help us in envisioning the ideal of Viksit Bharat 2047 better.

Indian Critical Tradition

Theorization or shastra-building comes rather naturally to the *samskara*, roughly called the collective consciousness, of the Indian mind given the abundant output of shastra-building in diverse fields of knowledge - both natural sciences and social sciences - that has happened in ancient India since at least 3000 BCE. One might not be surprised at Fred Dallaymer's mention of Greek *theoros* - the Greek root of 'theory' that meaning 'urgently interested in quest for truth, goodness and beauty' - three of the four founding *purusharthas* (values) in



Indian philosophy that act as means to attaining *moksha*. “*Ekoham Bahusyami*” (I am one but manifest as many) says the Upanishadic statement, implying the philosophical unity of the diverse branches of knowledge, their interconnectivity and interconnectedness not ignoring their epistemological diversity at the same time.

The uniqueness of Indian shastra-parampara lies in the fact that Theory in the Indian context has always had an active engagement with lived reality. The loka-shloka interaction has never been mutually exclusive. Moreover, shastra is based on one or more formulaic core texts (known as sutra texts) that are later elaborated through *vartikas* and *bhashyas* in the written form, and through debates, discussions, *katha-pravachana* and performances in the oral form. Thus, the modality of shastra-building in India throughout centuries has been oral, written, audio-visual and has always allowed the space for contestations and addition of new knowledge, which makes it a living tradition rather than a frozen one. All these characteristics of shastra-development may be found applicable to *kavyashastra* or *alamkarashastra* – alternatively called Indian Aesthetics or Indian Poetics in literature.

Prof. Radhvallabh Tripathi observes that the history of development of literary theorization in India may be classified into four stages: (1) the first stage from 3000 BC to 1000 BC where theatre was practiced based on the aesthetic prescriptions of Vedic corpus (2) the second stage around 1000 BC to the beginning of CE, where theoretical works such as Bharata’s famous *Natyashastra* and a less famous *Nat-sutra* by Shilalin were composed (3) The third stage from the first millennium of CE that saw theorists like Lollata, Sankuka, Matrugupta, Udbhata, Bhattanayaka, Abhinavgupta, Rajshekhara, Anandvardhana, Mammata, Vishvanath, etc. and their theories centred around meaning-making and linguistic defamiliarization (4) The contemporary time comprises the fourth stage where a few Sanskrit theorists like Rewaprasad Dwivedi and others have revived classical Indian poetics.

The general perception tells that there was a vacuum in the sphere of Indian critical activity post-Jagannātha, especially during the colonial times. Because majority of the books available on Indian Poetics cover theorists up to Jagannātha (17th c.) and nothing further. P V Kane’s famous *Sanskrit Kavyashastra ka Itihas* (1966), deemed by many a scholar as an



authentic reference book on Indian Poetics, includes 39 Sanskrit theorists chronologically, of which Jagannatha is the last. The case with S K De's *A History of Sanskrit Poetics* is no different. Hence the use of words like 'amnesia', 'rupture' or 'break' by scholars such as Prof Ganesh Devy in his *After Amnesia* (1992).

Prof A K Singh in his work *Revisiting Literature, Criticism and Aesthetics in India* written (2012), where he agrees with Kapil Kapoor's views that Indian critical tradition is a continuous and cumulative tradition of thinkers, texts and conceptual structures in different areas of human thought. He borrows the metaphor of *Gangā* from Pt. Bhagvat Shastri:

The Indian critical tradition flows like the sacred river *Gangā* after its origin (*āvirbhāva*) and many tributaries join on its way and get merged into it (*antarbhāva*). The *antarbhāva* leads to disappearance (*lopa*). The river, if there comes a mountain or any other intervention in its way, goes ahead after deflection. Some distributaries go out of it as branches and that may appear as the re-emergence (*prādurbhāva*) of what was submerged. This process of submergence of some and re-emergence of some other goes on continuously... (419)

This pravaha-nityata of Indian critical tradition must be viewed as a consequence and conglomerate of many traditions: in addition to Sanskrit, Tamil and Pali the vernacular Bhasha criticisms that developed after 15th-16th centuries, Arabic and Persian traditions, Indian English critical tradition and contemporary discourses like feminist, Dalit and nativist discourses.

Prof. TRS Sharma, in his book *Towards an Alternative Critical Discourse* examines the state of theory in India and talks of the great divide between universities in doing literary theory. He observes: "Radical critical spaces, usually, located in Metropolitan departments. In the so-called elite departments, where the latest trends in western critical thinking keep getting echoed, the critical space is predominantly inhabited by a missionary zeal to deconstruct any edifice of a narrative or discourse with an air of nihilistic irreverence... some kind of intellectual paranoia that leads them to see conspiracies everywhere, and some kind of epistemic violence, to create a hermeneutics of suspicion" in "language of crisis where the



buzz-words are difference, disruption, displacement, rupture etc.... applying these theoretical frameworks onto Indian English or Vernacular texts, with least consideration of the appropriateness of such a one size fits all methodology.”

This leads to a perception that the state of theory in India is derivative and parasitic where students and scholars of Indian academia see their ultimate achievement in seeing a text as postmodern, postcolonial or poststructural regardless of its relevance, its philosophical connotations and the conditions that produced such post structuralist theories in the west, celebrating the constant state of aporia, denying to accept anything positive from the discourses that critique such a state of aporia. In the wake of the discussions made above, one thinks whether the twentieth century has anything significant to offer in terms of originality and novelty of ideas and interpretation.

The paper presents cases of two Indian English art-thinkers from the twentieth century, all of them teacher-critics, who not only interpreted Bharatiya Kavyashastra in depth to the English-speaking world, but also made original contribution in taking this Shastra-parampara ahead. Their contribution became all the more significant because most of them were writing and operating in the times of high colonial pressure.

Ananda Coomaraswamy

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), the author of more than 650 works (including books, papers, articles, reviews, monographs, etc.), is generally considered “a forbidding terrain” and an “outlandish figure” (Narsimhaiah 1) for students of literature. The life-trajectory of this partly-Sinhalese, partly-English, ancestrally Indian geologist, art-historian and critic runs across countries like Ceylon, England, India and America, yet orbits intellectually around Indian art and knowledge-systems.

While for 19th-20th century scholars like Ruskin, “Indian sculptor could only create a multi-armed monster.” (Sivaramamurti CDN 1), Vincent Smith finds that the images of many-armed gods and goddesses, that “crowd the walls and roofs of medieval temples” have no element of beauty in them and are frequently “hideous and grotesque” (K Krishnamoorthy



CDN 68). One wonders whether such broadly generalized dismissal of everything Indian - sculpture, painting, music and poetry – by calling it exotic, bizarre, quaint, arbitrary, monstrous or immature is consequential to mere uninformed, hasty judgment or a part of a broader Orientalist project. Against this, he reinterpreted, for the West and the rest of the world, Indian aesthetic concepts along with elucidating the philosophical principles that serve as their bases. Chidananda Dasgupta, in his essay “Ananda Coomaraswamy: The East West Dilemma” finds two reasons why AKC’s perspectives on Indian art may be called superior to that of Western Scholars: the first is that he did not study art, as many Western Scholars did, with a lack of knowledge of the language and disciplines. For him, art was an expression of a way of life that was closely linked to language, religion, and culture – all of which he had thoroughly studied. The second was “his Indian tendency for wholeness rather than compartmentalization of thinking.” (10)

One observes that he felt equally at home with St. Thomas Aquinas as with Ramanujacharya, Shukracharya, or Buddhist philosophies; as swiftly traversing across Visvanatha’s *Sahitya Darpana* and Dante’s *Inferno* as through Eckhart and Kalidasa – such is the range of his references and cross-references. His purpose behind such steeping study was “using one tradition to illuminate the other” (Ramchandra 216) The gift from tradition was extraordinary, his gifts were extraordinary too.

In his essay “The Theory of Art in Asia”, he reexamines many a concept of aesthetics.

1. For instance, aesthetic intuition of the artist represents things that can be apprehended by the intellect.”²² (87) This is not to say that it is devoid of emotions. The stage of intellect is naturally beyond dry rationalism - a level of intellect in which the body, mind and heart cooperate as one entity. The act of artistic creation is a sacred act (*sādhana*) for him, and the artist / poet, a “*sādhaka*” – who must clear the mirror of his intellect before he begins to work, gathering his scattered powers for the act of creation. When the artist intuits, his *prajnā* (pure, discriminating intellect) is to be

²² And AKC would therefore agree with Plato who said opposed giving the name of art to anything irrational.



awakened, which is not possible under ordinary circumstances. What is required of the artist is mental concentration whereby his chosen object “becomes for the time being the single object of his attention and devotion.” (Transformation 7) It is in such *yoga* that the artist “sees” the image of what he wishes to make. It is an imaginative/creative faculty through which he intuits i.e. he ‘sees’ something beautiful (in a moment of contemplation. The artist/poet uses his aesthetic intuition for contemplating and visualizing the ‘form’ (*rūpa*) of the work of art he wants to create or compose. He thus propounds an Indian theory of formal element in art.

2. Besides this, he treats meticulously artistic concepts like nature of imitation, which he calls *sadrashya* and not *anukruti* (imitation), the validation of aesthetic truth or *pramana* based on careful reading of Buddhist scholar Dignaaga and St. Thomas Aquinas, the concept of impersonality in art almost a decade before T S Eliot spoke of it. Coomaraswamy has also advocated the expericne-centric approach towards art as against object-centric and treated beauty as a value and as a state of mind, which sets his aesthetics apart and unique from many a thinkers.
3. His *Dance of Śiva (1914)*, a popular work in Indian symbolism, is a collection of 14 essays mostly known for his famous interpretation of Natraja’s dance. The *Natarāja* image he calls "a synthesis of science, religion and art." (77) In an Indian response to symbolism, he says that the symbol's content always alludes to the metaphysical. Because they provide knowledge of cosmic similarities, the symbolic shapes have spiritual importance. The symbols appear unexpectedly to the artist, allowing him to discover links and relationships that had previously escaped him. Then there's images, which crystallises "art is the involuntary dramatization of subjective experience." (Raghavan 4) The technical symbolism of a work of art is a quest for freedom – *mokśa*. The source of AKC’s interpretation of the dancing lies in the ancient Tamil Śaiva tradition legends, some of which are popular even today in the traditional Tamil dancers. When one goes to the roots of the verses cited in the essay, originally found



in *Tirumantiram* (circa 6th century CE) authored by Tirumular²³, a whole range of Coomaraswamy's scholarship into Tamil Śaiva tradition and Tamil poetics becomes clear. He describes the image as a perfect visual image of becoming and explains its complex symbolism: The movement of the Dancing figure is so admirably balanced that while it feels all space, it seems never to be at rest. It captures motion – stillness in activity, thus realising the unity and simultaneity of *śrīṣṭi* (creation), *sthiti* (maintenance) and *samhāra* (release).

4. Among the Panchmahabhutas, the Natraja represents the Akash-tattva, the subtlest element of the five. In Vedic tradition, Akash-tattva is borne out of shabda as its tanmatra, vak as its karmendriya, shrotra as its gyanendriya, agni as the devta for vak, disha as the devta for shrotra. Natraja is depicted to be dancing in the Chidambaram temple (the prominence of Akasha-tattva in the temple's name itself). The essay refers to Tamil Bhakit poetry work 'Unnai Vilakkam' that says: "Creation arises from the damaru..." Coomaraswamy's interpretation makes it clear leads one to interpret the Damaru sound as the shabda tanmatra (the origin of naad-brahma), Vaak karmendriya & Shrotra gyanendriya = Word / speech / literature, Agni is the devata for Vaak which is visible from the fiery appearance of Natraja's tandava, Disha devata for Shrotra are justified from the spatial dimension of Natraja's dance or Chidambaram At adhyatmika level, this dance, just like all other elements originating from Akash-tattva, is said to be the prapanch / leela / the play of Turiya. If this be true, it is now clear why Kalidasa worships Parvati & Parmeshawar with the analogy of Vaak & Artha. Isn't it full of auchitya?!

²³ The *Tirumantiram*, authored by Tirumular, is a Tamil poetic work. Its exact date of composition is uncertain, with suggestions ranging from the 6th century CE to post 10th century CE. The *Tirumantiram* is the tenth volume among the twelve volumes of the *Tirumurai*, which are considered significant texts of the Śaiva Siddhānta tradition. Apparently, it is the earliest known Tamil work that employs the term *Tirumantiram*.



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Conclusion

The notion that there was a gap/break in Indian critical tradition for almost three centuries or more after Jagannātha is false. In fact, there appeared works in Sanskrit poetics, though many of them may be called re-interpretations, in sizeable amount. Along with this, there was substantial critical activity going on in various Indian languages which, as a result of colonial influence, remains less discussed. Although Indian criticism, especially English and Gujarati in the twentieth century, seems to be imitative and parasitic, it is not that there was no original theorisation in these languages. There are original and unique theories formulated by the select critics.