

A Birthday Tribute :

Ananda Coomaraswamy : Contribution to Indian Dance Criticism

M. NAGABHUSHANA SARMA

“This Boston Brahmin, Ananda Coomaraswamy, was more of a *smartha*, a true, an Orthodox Indian than some tottering old president of the Indian National Congress. India would never be made by our politicians, and professors of political science, but by these isolate existences of India, in which India is rememorated, experienced and communicated; beyond history, as tradition, as the truth; it matters little. But this India of Coomaraswamy, who will take it away, I ask you, who? Not Tammurlane or even Joseph Stalin.”

Raja Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*,

London: John Murray, 1960, pp. 356-357

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) is many things to many people – aesthetician, art critic, interpreter of Indian metaphysics, an authority on Indian Painting, a cultural ambassador from India to the west, a lover of Indian *swadeshi* movement, a sage, a visionary. Indeed, many are the vistas that he opened before us, and “there is hardly a branch of knowledge pertaining to India on which he did not leave an indelible mark of his genius.”¹ The uniqueness of Coomaraswamy was not only that “he knew so much in so many fields but that he was able to weave his myriad ideas and thoughts into such a profound synthesis.”² He looked deep into the cultural ethos of India through myriad eyes – through their myths, crafts, paintings, Vedas and epics, sculpture and dance and drama. Each one is but a facet of that monolith – the essence that was India. Professor Richard Ettinghausen, American art critic and a friend of Coomaraswamy, mentioned in nut shell what the whole art and culture world thought of Coomaraswamy:

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“There are few scholars anywhere in the world whose publications cover a wider range than those of Dr. A. K. Coomaraswamy . . . His researches embrace philosophy, metaphysics, religion, iconography, Indian literature and arts, Islamic art, medieval art, music, geology, and especially the place of art in society.”³

Coomaraswamy’s writings comprise some one thousand items, including more than 30 books. His multi-layered genius will be evident in the introductory words of Roger Lipsey, the editor of his works published in Bolingen series.⁴

“In earlier years, he was a pioneer and authority in the field of Indian art, and also a careful but popular writer on Hinduism and Buddhism. In later years, when his thought had ramified, he was known to some as a Sanskrit and Pali scholar; to others as an historian, mythographer, folklorist and social critic; to still others as a metaphysician and expositor of the complexities of Indian thought.”⁵

Though much has been written on Coomaraswamy’s interpretative writings on Indian and Buddhist art, his approach to dance and the allied forms seems to have been overshadowed by the emphasis given to his varied writings on painting and sculpture. That he was a pioneer in bringing the vast knowledge of Indian dance traditions to the entire world is itself a testimony to his deep understanding of the ancient Indian *natya* traditions. It is also evident that his approach to *natya* is not an isolated one; it should be seen in consonance with his ideas on ancient Indian culture, painting and its principles of creativity.

LIFE

Ananda Coomaraswamy was opposed to biographies and autobiographies, an attitude that was reflected in Neoplatonic, Gnostic, Christian and Asiatic writings. “I would not think of writing my auto-biography . . . There are only a very few autobiographies that I think have been necessary and fully justified. I myself am not interested in my personal history and could not make it of interest or value to anyone else.”⁶ In spite of his understandable reluctance, scholars both before and after his death in 1947, have persistently made efforts to gather details from his own writings and lectures and from interviews of friends regarding his personal and creative life. After his death, however, two very painstaking efforts have been made to bring details of Coomaraswamy’s life and letters into public awareness: S. Durai Raja Singam, who was for long a student of Coomaraswamy’s life and writings, brought out a Memorial Volume⁷, besides editing and publishing some seminal papers. The other effort made by the Harvard University Press which published a three-volume collection of Coomaraswamy’s papers in the

Bolingen Series (LXXXIX), the third volume having been devoted to Coomaraswamy's "life and work."⁸

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy was born on August 22, 1877 at Colombo in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), of a Tamil father and an English mother. His father, Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy (1834-1879), belonging to a long-migrated family of Tamil ancestry, was a barrister by profession and was hailed as a scholar with deep ethnic orientation. Ananda lost his father when he was only two years old and was brought up by his mother in England. He was educated first at Wycliff School at Stonehouse in Gloucestershire and later at the University of London. His early interest in geology and mineralogy resulted in a seminal paper on "Ceylon Rocks and Graphite" and this led eventually to his appointment as the Director of the Mineralogical Survey of Ceylon at the age of 25. He later obtained a degree of Doctor of Science (D. Sc.) from the University of London. This early scientific training has had a strong bearing on his subsequent treatment of subjects systematically and completely.

During this time he founded Ceylon Social Reform Society, and edited a journal, *Ceylon National Review*. In 1909 he left Ceylon along with the Tagores and after reaching Gloucestershire, established a press, Essex House Press, at Broad Campden, Gloucestershire. It was here that he published his first great work, *Medieval Sinhalese Art*. He established the 'Royal Indian Society' with well-known art historians like William Rothenstein (1910). He came for a short while to India to be incharge of the U.P. exhibition at Allahabad (1911) and would have stayed on but for the failure of his attempts in establishing an Indian Art Museum or securing a place as a Professor of Art in an Indian University. During his six-year stay in India, he discovered Rajput painting and wrote extensively on the miniature paintings, which brought him national and international recognition. In 1917 he left for the United States of America where he became the keeper of Indian and Mohammedan Art in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In 1933 he was appointed a Fellow for research in Indian, Persian, and Muslim Art in the same institute and remained there until the year of his death in 1947.

WORKS

Even a cursory look at the innumerable writings of Coomaraswamy would make one realize his pioneering work in a largely uncharted field. He threw new light on certain basic artistic problems whether in the description of a South Indian bronze, an explication of a Rajput painting or an icon. All his writings are marked by two important qualities: his clarity in expressing himself with preci-

sion and his scientific approach in supplying original references to his analysis, whether they are from the Vedas, the Upanishads, the epics or from mythical and *sastraic* references.

Coomaraswamy's was a synthetic vision, combining the best in ancient cultures and modern logical thinking, though he often erred on the former side. His basic contribution to world culture and thought can best be understood from his popular essay: "What Has India Contributed to Human Welfare?"



All that India can offer to the world proceeds from her philosophy. This philosophy is not, indeed, unknown to others – it is equally the gospel of Jesus and of Blake, Lao Tze and Rumi – but nowhere else has it been made the essential basis of sociology and education In India . . . philosophy is not regarded primarily as a mental gymnastic, but rather, and with deep religious conviction, as our salvation (moksha) from the ignorance (avidya) which forever hides from our eyes the vision of reality. Philosophy is the key to the map of life, by which are set forth the meaning of life and the means of attaining its goal . . . what is needed for the common civilization of the world is the recognition of common problems, and to cooperate in their solution. If it be asked what inner riches India brings to aid in the realization of a civilization of the world, then, from the Indian standpoint, the answer must be found in her religions and her philosophy, and her constant application of abstract theory to practical life.⁹

Coomaraswamy's first important book, *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (1908), is an encyclopaedic work on the arts and crafts of Ceylon before the colonial rule. He realized that the decline of the native arts in Ceylon and India due to the impact of Industrialism and Coomaraswamy championed their cause. His interest in physi-

cal sciences gradually moved on to visual arts and philosophy. He declared that “craftsmanship is a mode of thought” and the achievement of the rural artisans is by no means less than the urban celebrities. He felt that “the descendents of higher craftsmen are still able to carry out difficult tasks with conspicuous ability, and suffer more from lack of patronage than lack of skill.”¹⁰

Coomaraswamy is generally known as an art-historian, though he was really much more. This was so because he was the first one to collect artefacts and gather drawings of ancient times and also supply the needed explicatory notes on these arts. In book after book, Coomaraswamy recognized the aesthetic legacies of our ancient artistic endeavours and wrote about them in such a way that all successive art historians and critics of Indian art remained indebted to him.

Similarly, the monumental tomes, entitled *Yakshas*, “will remain among his outstanding contributions, and are a testimony of his erudition and analytical brilliance.”¹¹ He was certainly the sole discoverer of Rajput and Pahari paintings. He is one of the earliest scholars of iconographic studies. “The Origin of the Buddha Image”, “Early Indian Iconography – Indra and Sri Laxmi” and several other studies offer us insights into the rare science of iconology.

His studies led to a series of notable and influencing research papers and his justly famous work, “*History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (1927).”¹² Before this work, Coomaraswamy wrote several pamphlets and published many art collections from India including *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* (1913), *Viswakarma: Examples of Indian Architecture, Sculpture, Painting, Handicrafts* (1914), *Rajput Painting* (1916). But just before he published these monumental works, he published an article, “The Indian Craftsman”, published in his *Essays in Indian Nationalism*. It is in this article that Coomaraswamy upheld the traditional Indian custom of the patron-craftsman relationship. This is an Indian point of view regarding education with which Coomaraswamy compared the contemporary English education. He unhesitatingly pointed out that “problem-solving education in a patriarchal atmosphere is superior to education in large English technical schools”; and that “the close relation between patron (peasant or royal) and craftsman (village or court) produced better results than an impersonal relation between those who need things and those who make them”¹³

Coomaraswamy wrote extensively on Indian art, either it be on Rajput painting, Gupta Art, Raga-Mala painting or medieval Indian art. He had, however, no love for modern art. Defining Art as “an intellectual act,” and “a conception of Form, corresponding to an idea in the mind of the artist,” he rightly surmises on

the Indian or Eastern psyche behind an artist remaining anonymous: “. . . Indian artist, although a person, is not a personality; his personal idiosyncrasy is at the most a part of his equipment, and never the occasion of his art. All of the great Indians works are anonymous, and all that we know of the lives of Indian artists in any field could be printed in a tract of dozen pages.”¹⁴

Coomaraswamy's deep insight had turned from art-history and iconography to philosophy and aesthetics, starting with his most often repeated essay, “The Dance of Shiva”,¹⁵ published in 1917. As Prof. C.D. Narasimhaiah pointed out, it is really in his lengthy essay, “Theory of Art in Asia” that one gets a full account of Coomaraswamy's discussion of Indian Poetics of *Natya Sastra*, to Anandavardhana's *Sahitya Darpana*. “What is striking in this essay is that he links it up with traditional Chinese, Japanese, Islamic attitudes to art, of which puts its faith in imitation of Nature, not as effect but as Cause, not as expression of personality, but of perennial Truth, and therefore response to art not a peripheral accomplishment but has a function and an end – a *prayojana* and a *Purushartha*.”¹⁶ Similarly, “he was the earliest amongst scholars to draw the attention of the world to the superior qualities of classical Indian dance,”¹⁷ as exemplified in his influential book, *The Mirror of Gesture*.

THE DANCE OF SHIVA AND OTHER ESSAYS

The Dance of Shiva (1917), the most influential of Ananda Coomaraswamy's works which helped western readers to understand the meaning of Shiva's dance and its place in Indian cosmology, contains 14 essays, including the title essay, “The Dance of Shiva”, which has since become a classic. As Roman Rolland, in his “Foreword” to the book, mentioned: “In a series of essays which are apparently detached but all of which spring from the same central thought and coverage into one design, the vast and tranquil metaphysic of India is unfolded, her conception of the Universe, social organization, perfect in its day and still capable of adaptation to the demands of modern times.”¹⁸

It is true that the book reveals the “vast and tranquil metaphysic of India”. “The Dance of Shiva”, one of the essays in the book epitomizes, more than any work earlier or later, this “metaphysic” which was valid “in its day”, but also of modern times.

Ananda Coomaraswamy was deeply read into “Shaiva siddhanta”. His father himself was a scholar of Shaivism. Coomaraswamy was also adept in the Tamil

scriptures, myths and Shaiva literature and went into the roots of the various meanings of the symbols by the ancient sculptors in creating the images of the Dancing Shiva.

As noted by Durai Raja Singam,¹⁹ Ananda Coomaraswamy's transcriptions of the Dance of Shiva are found in several of his short and lengthy writings. The references to the dancing Shiva started appearing as early as in 1908, in his short book, *Aims of Indian Art*. Followed by his pen-pictures as found in the accounts of the Bronzes from Ceylon, in descriptive plates of *Rajput Painting* and in his writings on Shaiva sculptures and the essay "The Dance of Shiva" in *Siddhanta Dipika* (1912).

Durai Raja Singam²⁰ quoted at least 13 different works in which Ananda Coomaraswamy discussed the nature and functions of the Dancing Shiva as manifest in the Chidambaram temple. What specially signifies his references is his unmistakable ability to bring into operation the literary, the sculptural, the aesthetic, the metaphysical and the mythical aspects that are at work continuously and in unison in the making of art objects in India, and by extension, in all creative activity.

"The Dance of Shiva in Chidambaram", writes Coomaraswamy, "forms the motif of the South Indian copper images of Nataraja, the Lord of the Dance."

The images, then, represent Shiva dancing having four hands with braided and jewelled hair of which the lower locks are whirling in dance. In his hair may be seen a wreathing cobra, a skull, and the mermaid figure of Ganga: upon it rests the crescent moon, and it is crowned with a wreath of Cassia leaves. In His right ear He wears a man's earring, a woman's in the left; He is adorned with necklaces and armlets, a jewelled belt, anklets, bracelets, finger and toe-rings. The chief part of His dress consists of tightly fitting breeches, and He wears also a fluttering scarf and a sacred thread. One right hand holds a drum, the other is uplifted in the sign of do not fear: one left hand holds fire, the other points down upon the demon Muyalaka, a dwarf holding a cobra; the left foot is raised. There is a lotus pedestal, form which springs an encircling glory (*tiruvasi*), fringed with flame, and touched within by the hands holding drum and fire.²¹

Coomaraswamy has explained elsewhere²² that the dance of Shiva takes place not merely at Chidambaram,²³ "but in the heart of the worshipper. Perhaps we are all worshippers of Nataraja. For the dance of Shiva is an aesthetic epitome of an Indian view of life that lights up the deeps of the creative process."²⁴

The dance as described in “The Dance of Shiva” represents “Shiva’s five activities (*panchakriya*), viz: *Srishti*, (overlooking, creation, evolution), *Sthiti* (preservation, support), *samhara* (destruction, evolution), *Tirobhava* (veiling, embodiment, illusion, and also, giving rest), *Anugraha* (release, salvation, grace). These, separately considered, are the activities of the deities *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Rudra*, *Maheswara* and *Sadasiva*.”²⁵

“To summarize the essential significance of Shiva’s Dance, it is threefold: First, it is the image of his Rhythmic play as the Source of all Movement within the cosmos, which is represented by the Arch: Secondly, the Purpose of His Dance is to release The countless souls of men from the Snare of Illusion: Thirdly, the place of the Dance, Chidambaram, the Centre of the Universe, is within the Heart.”²⁶

According to Ananda Coomarswamy “the Hindu Dance aims at a kind of visible poetry with a definite meaning. It attempts to tell a story or to allude to some events or Divine personalities by means of formal gestures, presented in rhythmic sequence, accompanied by singing in tune with musical instruments.”²⁷ Such Dance, epitomized in that of Lord Shiva, has the grandeur of synthesis of science, religion and art and quoted the legend on which Shiva’s images are found from *Koyil Puranam* by Umapati Sivachariar,²⁸ according to which Shiva is said to have performed one of his most wonderful dances, namely, the *Nadanta* dance, in the forest of Tarangam. Here, he outlines what he himself understands to be the meaning of the dance. He then goes on to illustrate his point, citing examples from *Unmai Vilakkam*, *the Chidambara Mummani Kovai* and the *Tirukuthu Darisanam*.

The several activities of Shiva are brought into focus in Coomaraswamy’s explication of the dancing Shiva and are carefully recognized – specially the seemingly opposing roles of creation and destruction. Ananda Coomaraswamy writes:

“Shiva is a destroyer and loves the burning ground. But what does He destroy? Not merely the heavens and earth at the close of a world-cycle, but the fetters that bind each separate soul. Where and what is the burning ground? It is not the place where our earthly bodies cremated, but the hearts of His lovers, laid waste and desolate. The place where the ego is destroyed signifies the state where illusion and deeds are burnt away: that is the crematorium, the burning-ground where Sri Nataraja dances, and whence He is named Sudalaiyadi, Dancer of the burning ground. In this simile, we recognize the historical connection between Siva’s gracious dance as Nataraja, and His wild dance as the demon of the cemetery.”²⁹

Throughout this essay on the Dance of Shiva, Coomaraswamy aims at the all-embracing nature of the Hindu view of Art, a Holistic approach carefully conceived and demurely executed. The achievements of Ananda Coomaraswamy in his interpretation of the Shiva image, and through it, the whole of Indian attitude to creative process, are both immediate and far-reaching. The immediate achievement is to turn the attention of the western sensibility towards an appreciation of Indian art and supplying the necessary tools to do it. But more importantly, Coomaraswamy's treatment of the subject has overwhelming philosophical overtones regarding the nature and functions of art – in this case the need for deification of metaphysical concepts. In the case of Gods with several forms (as in the case of the Dancing Shiva at Chidambaram), Coomaraswamy explains in one of his notes.³⁰

The forms of deities, which 'are determined by the relation which exists between the adorer and the object of adoration' were at first comparatively few and simple; afterwards, partly by the recognition of new divinities of popular origin, partly by the deification of metaphysical concepts, the number of aspects and variety of form increased. It may be remarked that after the first century A. D. the typical form of a god is four-armed. The additional arms are to carry the attributes of the god; still more complicated forms have come into use at later periods. Finally, it may be said that visible imagery of the Hindu (and Buddhist) pantheon represents, as precisely as the written texts, an encyclopaedia of Indian psychological and social, ethical and physical science – each divinity or aspect of divinity (for all are referred to one source) representing a particular power or force, or combination of forces.³¹

Ananda Coomaraswamy's explication, interpreted mainly for his western readers, had become a base for future studies on the subject by art historians. "Gods with many limbs, abhorred as unnatural and reflecting a primitive society steeped in superstition, according to them gained a sympathetic ambience who lent their ears to symbolism contained in them."³² "The Dance of Shiva" and other essays on dance not only showed a hostile readership as to the symbolism that lies underneath an art but also directed its attention towards the ways in which art is to be appreciated:

A work of art is great in so far as it expresses its own theme in a form at once rhythmic and impassioned through a definite pattern it might express a motif deeply felt. To appreciate any art, we ought not to concentrate our attention upon its peculiarities - ethical or formal but should endeavour to *take for granted* what-

ever the artist takes for granted. No motif appears bizarre to those who have been familiar with it for generations: and in the last analysis it must remain beyond the reach of all others so long as it remains in their eyes primarily bizarre.³³

THE MIRROR OF GESTURE

Besides "The Dance of Shiva" and other articles which outline Coomaraswamy's deep sense of the 'form' in the Indian concept of the Universe, the one book that throws light on his interest in and his attitude to Indian Dance, is *The Mirror of Gesture*,³⁴ (a translation of Nandikesvara's *Abhinaya Darpana*) with Coomaraswamy's introduction. Durai Raja Singam observed on the translation of *Abhinaya Darpana* and other writings on Indian dance: "When he wrote his first essay on classical Indian dance, orthodox critics in South India marvelled that a man who had been brought up in so western an environment could penetrate into the symbols and form of this neglected branch of Indian art with such depth of perception, and communicate his understanding so lucidly to others."³⁵ This famous treatise on dance was translated by Ananda Coomaraswamy and Gopala Krishnayya Duggirala and was published in 1917. This was the earliest English rendering of the work and thus a pioneering effort in introducing the Indian concept of drama and dance to the western enthusiast. Throughout his career Ananda Coomaraswamy had provided a new outlook on the facets of Indian arts to the westerner readers. For example, La Meri, the famous French-born American dancer who learnt to perform Indian dances recounts that when she approached Uday Shanker in Paris in 1931 to teach her, he rejected to do so saying that "he was not a teacher." However, he brought his copy of *The Mirror of Gesture* and gave to her saying, "Here is my teacher. Let him be yours."³⁶ Such was the influence the book had on practising dancers. Unlike the other writings



on art, painting and sculpture, in which Coomaraswamy was painstakingly explaining the aspects of Indian culture to not too positive readers. This translation is made due to a positive response of Coomaraswamy to an enthusiastic enquiry from a theatre friend to acquaint him with materials on Indian dance and drama.

There are two interesting facts regarding the translation of Nandikesvara's *Abhinaya Darpana* into English. One is the co-authorship. We do not know how and when Ananda Coomaraswamy and Gopala Krishnayya Duggirala³⁷ came together to do the work. Gopala Krishnayya was in England during 1911-1916, studying for his Master's degree and must have got in touch with Coomaraswamy in London. Like Coomaraswamy, Gopala Krishnayya was an ardent nationalist, a linguist and a poet. His leadership in his native town of Chirala was proverbial since he built a whole town adjacent to Chirala to counter the British administration's move to make the town a municipality and burden the poor people with taxes. The two men, though shared common interests, seem quite different from each other. Ananda Coomaraswamy is a serious student of what is best in Indian culture, an intellectual to the core and a nationalist whose pride in his native land led him to be its cultural interpreter. On the other hand, Gopala Krishnayya's was a fighting spirit. Restless at being impotent as a nation, his tirades against the British were open and daring, his sense of humour serving as a soothing tonic. A great humourist, his public speeches abounded in anecdotes and impromptu poetry. A scholar in Sanskrit, English and Telugu, Gopala Krishnayya was given the title "Andhra Ratna", the Jewel of Andhra. The one reason for their combined effort in translating *Abhinaya Darpana* can be attributed to the fact that all *Abhinaya Darpana* manuscripts are in Telugu and the one made use of by the writers, similarly, was one such and Coomaraswamy wanted someone who was proficient in Sanskrit, Telugu and English and found Gopala Krishnayya with all these qualities in abundance.

The second interesting factor about the translation of this classical text on *abhinaya* is that it is inspired by yet another scholar-theoretician-director-visionary, Gordon Craig. Writings about the genesis of this work, Coomaraswamy writes:

"Mr. Gordon Craig, who understands so well the noble artificiality of Indian dramatic technique, has frequently asked me for more detailed information that is yet available in this too-long neglected field."³⁸

Craig (1872-1966) was the son of the famous actress Ellen Terry and started his career in theatre in Henry Irving Company. A staunch opponent of Naturalism and an architect of symbolism in theatre, it was but natural that Craig was

interested in Indian theatre, in which a portrayal of the natural through symbolic means was predominant. In his influential book, *The Art of the Theatre*³⁹, Craig made 'symbolism' the *tour de force* of all acting and made the actor subservient to the art of the theatre. He called the actor "ubermarionette" – a superior puppet. His greater contribution to theatre was his persistent use of the symbolic mode in theatre practices, including acting. It was only befitting that Craig, a visionary, approached another visionary, Ananda Coomaraswamy, to enlighten him on the Indian art of theatre. Here is a part of the letter from Craig Coomaraswamy himself quoted:

"If there are books of technical instruction," writes Mr. Gordon Craig, "tell them to me I pray you. The day may come when I could afford to have one or two translated for my own private study and assistance. I dread (seeing what it has already done in other arts her) the influence of the finished article of the East; but I crave the instruction of the instructors of the East. The disastrous effect the Chinese porcelain and the Japanese print has had on us in painting we must try to avoid in this theatre art You know how I reverence and love with all my best the miracles of your land, but I dread for my men lest they go blind suddenly attempting to see God's face. You know well what I mean, I think. So I want to cautiously open this precious and dangerous (only to us queer folk) book of technical instruction before the men go crazy over the lovely dancers of the King of Cambodia, before the 'quaintness' tickles them, before they see a short cur to a sensation. If only you knew how unwilling these men of the theatre (most of all those dissatisfied with the old sloppy order) were to face the odds, and how they long to escape obligations (your phrase in 'Sati') you would almost make a yearly tour of England crying 'Shun the East and the mysteries of the East.'"⁴⁰

Coomaraswamy's response to this request resulted in the translation of this "shorter compendium" in the absence of "a complete and adequate translation and even a satisfactory edition, of the 'Dramatic Science' (*Natya Sastra*) of Bharata."⁴¹

Coomaraswamy's introduction to *The Mirror of Gesture*, "Inscribed By the Translators with Affectionate Greeting To all Actors Actress" (Dedication), is path-breaking. He gave a short note on the origin of Indian drama according to *Natya Sastra*, followed by an explication of the greatness of this art.⁴² He also outlined the tradition of *rang-pujah* and the theatre-houses. Coomaraswamy's comments based on *Natya Sastra* (Ch. II) regarding the actor and his attitude to character synchronized Craig's attitude as well.

“... the behavior of the artist must of necessity be ‘studied’, and not ‘impulsive’; for the human actor, who seeks to depict the drama of heaven, is not himself a god, and only attains to perfect art through conscious discipline.”⁴³

Ananda Coomaraswamy emphasized the Indian point of view with regard to artistic representation on the stage: “All the activities of the gods, whether in house or garden, spring from a *natural disposition of the mind*, but all the activities of men result from the *conscious working of the will*, therefore it is that the details of the actions to be done by men be carefully prescribed.”⁴⁴

After his preliminary comments on the divine origin of the art and the need to translate on stage, “the natural disposition of the mind” of the characters in terms of “the conscious working of the will” of the actors, Ananda Coomaraswamy goes into the technical details of Indian dance/drama which served as an excellent preamble for his treatise on *Abhinaya Darpana*.

Striking at the roots of the differences between Indian approach to dance and the Western approach, Ananda Coomaraswamy made it abundantly clear that the Indian word *Natya* was all inclusive unlike its English counterpart, dance:

It should be noted throughout that the words *Natya*, etc. imply both acting and dancing; we have used the word ‘dance’ in our translation only for want of any English word combining the ideas of dancing and acting. The reader will go far astray if he understands by dancing anything but rhythmic shewing. Indian acting is a poetic art, an interpretation of life, while modern European acting, apart from any question of the words, is prose, or imitation.⁴⁵

Calling this *Natya* “a deliberate art” – “a conscious working of the will” as he called earlier, Ananda Coomaraswamy explains that in Indian acting or dancing (“a same word, *Natya*, covers both ideas”). “Nothing is left to chance; the actor no more yields to the impulse of the moment in gesture than in the spoken word.”⁴⁶ Everything is exact; pre-meditated and communicated in the way it should be.

It is in this “preparedness” of the expressive art that the basis of gesture language lies. Citing analogies from the other areas of artistic presentation, Ananda Coomaraswamy stresses the propriety of gesture language in the art of dance:

“Precisely as the text of the play remains the same whoever the actor may be, precisely as the score of a musical composition is not varied by whomsoever it may be performed, so there is no reason why an accepted gesture-language

(*angikabhinaya*) should be varied with a view to set off advantageously the actor's personality. It is the action, not the actor, which is essential to dramatic art."⁴⁷

This 'preparedness' on the part of the artist, so believed Coomaraswamy, would lead to the perfection of the art, since to acquire the gesture language to interpret the 'natural disposition' of the divine actors into the conscious working of the will" by the actor, needed great preparation on the part of the artist. "Under these conditions, of course, there is no room for any amateur upon the stage," and he declares almost with a sense of pride, that "in fact, the amateur does not exist in Oriental art."⁴⁸ Since the artist exhibits his art "independent of his own emotional conditions", in the same way as "a puppet showman has over the movements of his puppets"⁴⁹, excellent acting "wears the air of perfect spontaneity, but that is the art which conceals art."⁵⁰ Coomaraswamy, finds the same thing holds good in painting as well. He concludes his comments on the nature of the art as seen generally in the Indian context and particularly in *The Mirror of Gesture*, "the more deeply we penetrate the technique of any typical Oriental art, the more we find that what appears to be individual, "impulsive and 'natural', is actually long-inherited, well-considered, and well-bred."⁵¹

Gesture language, besides transcreating the ideas of the mind into concrete images of gesture, also plays a vital role in suggesting the background to the theme of the presentation. "The Indian actor relies only to a very small extent on properties, and still less on scenery." This is true of both the folk theatre practice as well as classical theatre practice. Citing specific examples from Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam*, and relying upon Raghavabhatta's *Arthadyotanika*, a commentary on *Sakuntala*, Ananda Coomaraswamy describes the scene in which Sakuntala pours water to the trees:

"Let us take a few episodes from the "Sakuntala" of Kalidasa and see how they are presented. The "Watering of a Tree" is to be acted according to the following directions: "First show *Nalina-padmakosa* hands palms downwards, then raise them to the shoulder, incline the head, somewhat bending the slender body, and pour out. *Nalina-padmakosa* hands are as follows: *Sukatunda* hands are crossed palms down, but not touching, turned a little backward, and made *Padmakosa*. To move the *Nalina-padmakosa* hands down wards is said to be 'pouring out.'"⁵²

Coomaraswamy also details how Sakuntala acts out the fear when a bee haunts her:

“Showing fear of a bee” is to be acted as follows: “Move the head quickly to and fro (*Vidhutam*), the lips quivering, while Pataka hands are held unsteadily against the face, palms inward.” “Gathering Flowers” is to be acted as follows: “Hold the left hand horizontally in *Arala*, the right hand in *Hamsasya*, extended forward at the side.” The left hand here represents a basket, and imaginary flowers are picked with the right hand and transferred to the left. “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.”⁵³

In order to understand and appreciate this pre-meditated, well-considered language of gesture, it needs “cultivated audience”,⁵⁴ unlike the European spectator who remains an “outsider”. This might be inferred that the actor and the spectator must be experts in making and unmaking of the symbols of the actor is an accomplished artist with an expertise in his *abhinaya*, the meanings he portrays are understood by everyone. It is not “practised by everyone, but is understood by everyone.”⁵⁵ One reason why the language is understood by the Indian spectator might be that the subject-matter is “common ground for all.”

As an extension to the spectator’s responses to the manifestations of *abhinaya*, Ananda Coomaraswamy elaborately discusses the actor-spectator relationship as based on “imagination”, which leads the participants to experience aesthetic emotion.” Here is Coomaraswamy’s explication:

“But the knowledge of technique and theme is not alone sufficient, without imagination; and according to the Indian view, the power to experience aesthetic emotion is inborn, it cannot be acquired by mere study, being the reward of merit gained in a former life. Whether of not this be true of the individual, it is certainly true of human communities, where no great art ever yet sprang into being out of nothing in a single generation. Art, and the general understanding of art, are always the result of a long, united, and consistently directed effort, and nothing can be done unless the artist and the spectator share a common inspiration.”⁵⁶

Finally, Ananda Coomaraswamy dwells on the purpose of dance in the Indian context:

“It will be seen that in all cases the dance is felt to fulfil a higher end than that of mere entertainment: it is ethically justified upon the ground that it subserves

the Four Ends of life, and this view of *Natya* is plainly stated in Tiruvenkatakari's preface translated below. The arts are not for our instruction, but for our delight, and this delight is something more than pleasure, it is the godlike ecstasy of liberation from the restless activity of the mind and the senses, which are the veils of all reality, transparent only when we are at peace with ourselves. From the love of many things we are led to the experience of Union: and for this reason Tiruvenkatakari does not hesitate to compare the actor's or dancer's art with the practice of Yoga. The secret of all art is self-forgetfulness."⁵⁷

Their purpose in translating this book, says, Coomaraswamy, "is to interest and assist the living actor" (supposedly of the west), - "not that we suppose that it might be profitable for him to adopt the actual gesture-language of the East, but that it may inspire him with the enthusiasm and the patience needful for the re-creation of the drama in his own environment."⁵⁸

Coomaraswamy's unique expertise in every field of Indian culture, and especially in art, dance and drama, marked by clarity and written in a lucid style and with precision, opened up new vistas for the western reader. This expertise can be seen in three virtuous ways: one was that Coomaraswamy could go to the original sources from where he methodically based his ideas; second, a polyglot of languages, who could easily traverse from one language to the other – from Greek to Sanskrit, from Latin to French, German, Spanish and Persian, from English to Tamil, Hindi and Sinhalese. But that he synthesized all of them to give a focus to his own thoughts and in that attempt bringing together the West and the East into a happy fusion.

NOTES

1. S. Durai Raja Singam (ed.), *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again*, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, 1974, p. 213.
2. S. Chandrasekhar, *Ananda Coomaraswamy: A Critical Appreciation*, Bombay: Blackie & Son, 1977, p. 29.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
4. Roger Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work* (in 3 volumes), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977. (All further quotations referred as "Lipsey"), pp. 293-304.
5. "Preface", Lipsey, Vol. 3, p. xiii.
6. Ananda Coomaraswamy's, letter to K. Bharata Iyer, quoted in Bharata Iyer, (ed.) *Art and Thought: A Volume in Honour of the Late Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy* London, 1947, p. xiii.
7. S. Durai Raja Singam, *Remembering and Remembering Again and Again* Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, 1974; further quotations from this book are referred as "S. Durai Raja Singam."

8. Roger Lipsey, *op.cit.*
9. Quoted by S. Chandrasekhar, p. 30; originally published in *The Athenaeum* 1915.
10. Durai Raja Singam, p. 213.
11. Durai Raja Singam, p. 213.
12. *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, Leipzig, London, and New York, 1927.
13. Lipsey, pp. 51-52.
14. Cited in Durai Raja Singam (ed.), "Introduction", *Fundamentals of Indian Art* (vol. I), Jaipur, The Historical Research Documentation Programme, 1985, p. xii.
15. Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva : Fourteen Indian Essays*, New York, The Sunwise Town Book Shop, 1918.
16. C.D. Narasimhaiah, (ed.) *Ananda Coomaraswamy Centenary Essays*, Mysore: Prasaranga, 1982, p. xxii.
17. K. Bharata Iyer (ed.), *Art and Thought: A Volume in Honour of the late Ananda Coomaraswamy*, London, 1947.
18. *The Dance of Shiva* (Indian edition), New Delhi: Munshiram Manohar Lal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1972, p. 7. All quotations are from this edition.
19. S. Durai Raja Singam, "My Dance of Siva[sic.] is Over", *Remembering and Remembering Again and Again*, pp. 140-141.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *The Dance of Shiva*, p. 86.
22. Cited in Moni Bagchee, *Ananda Coomaraswamy: A Study*, Varanasi: Bharata Manisha, 1977, p. 105.
23. "Chidambaram", which means "clothed in consciousness": *chit-ambaram*, is a temple town 151 miles south of Madras. The town is sanctified by the world famous temple of Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer. The inner wall of the temple has four gopurams two of which contain sculptural representations of the 108 *karanas*, as described in *Natya Sastra*.
24. Durai Raja Singam, *op.cit.*, p. 142.
25. *The Dance of Shiva*, p. 87.
26. *The Dance of Shiva*, p. 89.
27. Cited in Durai Raja Singam, *op.cit.*, p. 141.
28. Umapati Sivacariyar, *Koyil Puranam*. The *purana* of the Temple of Nataraja at Chidambaram, written in Tamil, with a commentary by Arumuga Navalar (Madras, 1952), For details, see Durai Raja Singam, *op.cit.*, p. 141, f.n. 3.
29. *The Dance of Shiva*, pp. 89-90.
30. *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* Boston, Vol. 20, No. 118, p. 19. Cited in Durai Raja Singam, *op.cit.*, p. 143.

31. "The latest concept to be deified after the fashion", continues Ananda Coomaraswamy, "is that of The Motherland, the Mata Bharata of Indian Nationalism." Durai Raja Singam, *op.cit.*, pp. 143-144.
32. "Indian Images with Many Arms", *The Dance of Shiva*, p. 100.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
34. *The Mirror of Gesture, Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara*, Translated into English by Ananda Coomaraswamy and Gopala Krishnayya Duggirala, (2nd edition). New Delhi: Munshiram Manohar Lal, 1977. Subsequent references are to this edition.
35. Durai Raja Singam, *op.cit.*, p. 213.
36. Cited in C.D. Narasimhaiah (ed.), *Ananda Coomaraswamy Centenary Essays*, Mysore: Prasaranga, p. 61.
37. Gopala Krishnayya Duggirala (1889-1928), was born in his native village, Kuchannapudi, Guntur Dist. of Andhra Pradesh and was educated at Guntur. A brilliant student, he then proceeded to Edinburgh University to do his M.A. while in England, he became a close associate and friend of Anand Coomaraswamy (1911-1916). After his return to India, he became a lecturer in the National College, Masulipatam and later left the job to lead the Nationalist movement at his native village, Chirala. A great literature and wit, Gopalakrishnayya started an organization, 'Goshti', for a free and frank discussion of political and social issues. He also raised a non-violent, service-oriented volunteer corps called 'Ramadandu', which worked relentlessly for disciplined political movement. He died on 10-6-1928.
38. *Mirror*, "Introduction", p. 1.
39. Gordon Edward Craig, *The Art of the Theatre*, Chicago, 1911.
40. *Mirror*, "Introduction", p.1.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Some of the *slokas* that denote the greatness of "Dramatic Science" occur in *Natya Sastra*, Chapter I, 107-130 *slokas*.
43. "Introduction", *Mirror*, p. 3.
44. *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
49. Coomaraswamy's reference to the puppeteer's art is perhaps to compare the Indian practice with Craig's treatment of the actor as a "uber-marionette."
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
54. "Cultivated audience": *Natya Sastra* prescribes qualities for a spectator and says that he should be a *sahridaya*.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
56. *Ibid.*
57. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 10.