

ANANDA COOMARASWAMY'S APPROACH TO INDIAN ART

K. Chandrasekharan

The name Indian Art specifies the representation and technique adopted by our ancient sculptors, painters, architects and handicraftsmen. It has its basis on a Philosophy and culture as old as the Indian civilization. The principal landmarks in the development of Indian Art can be said to have derived their influence from early scriptures and treatises such as the Patanjali Yoga Sutras, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, Manu Dharma Sastra, the Puranas as well as the theology of Shiva in the South and the cult of Krishna in the North. Each of these movements had made an indelible impression on Indian Art, its development and history.

The same philosophy underlying the scriptures and the epics infused the vision of the artists, painters, dancers and image-makers. What inures as the substratum of philosophy guiding Hindu life in general in the name of Sanatana Dharma (*philosophia parennis*), in its turn sustains the theories of art and preserves them from the inroads of modernistic outlook of any kind. In the main, the subjective aspect is greatly emphasised in the art-creations and the objective given a very subordinate place. The artist and the Sahridaya (enjoyer of art) are of equal importance for the creativity achieving its purpose. The spectator's initiation into the art-representation must have the needed equipment for appreciation. For it is not as in Western art generally where most of it is imitative and presentation of external view of objects. Any portrait or landscape in Western art is usually an attempt at copying things before one's physical eye. There is much less in it to lead one to contemplation of an inner meaning or conceit.

In order to draw the attention of the spectator to something beyond the apparent, the artist may have to break the rules of perspective and anatomy and give prominence to what he has to achieve in representing as the chief motif. I remember, once at an art exhibition, a painting representing a marriage procession in colours was on view. An elder and a boy of six years were both looking at the picture. The boy was attracted by the painting and exclaimed: 'Look father, how much gaiety is shown in the picture! The steps of the persons in the procession are dancing to the music of the pipers moving in front; I feel like participating in the joy of the marriage group.' But the father remarked: 'How improbable! If they go dancing their way,

surely the plates and baskets of sweets, flowers and fruits, which they carry in their hands will all fall down and their contents scattered on the road". Because the boy remained a boy without being sophisticated in his outlook like the elder, he felt the reaction which the artist expected of a spectator. It is clear, therefore, that in order to convey an emotion or motif everything in the picture should be directed towards its fulfillment. *Bhāva* or the particular feeling that is intended for communication should be the main pre-occupation of the artist. May be if a deviation from the normal had not been resorted to, the intention of the artist would have remained ineffectively conveyed, which is a greater defect than any failure in portraying of realistic details.

To show that in western countries too stray instances of artists having felt similarly, let me recall Robert Browning's considered opinion on seeing a picture:

'That arm is wrongly put—and there again
a fault to pardon in the drawing lines,
Its body so to speak; its soul is right
He means right—that a child may understand;
Still what an arm and I could alter it.
But all the play, the insight and the stretch—
Out of me! Out of me!

—'Andrea Del Sarto'

It is true that persons unfamiliar with the technique of Indian Art deem the dreamy eyes, the long arms and the body bends (*Bhāngas*) as strange and contrary to nature. But the very aim of the artist in Indian Art in creating such deviations is to convey the idealistic features. The spiritual message according to theories of Indian Art will not be imparted without those norms strictly adhered to. Ananda Coomaraswamy explains the special feature of Indian Art thus: "Perhaps the greatest obstacle to the scientific study of Indian Art lies in the modern conception of art as essentially imitative". According to him it is necessary to understand the mental atmosphere in which it grew. A spectator of a work of art needs first knowledge in himself to think and feel with the artist and put himself in sympathy with him. In every one of the sister arts of music, dance, architecture, sculpture and painting, the same principle holds good.

A question will be asked, why has it become so difficult now to view Indian Art with the same kind of understanding as we have for music, especially classical music, without an interruption in the long history of our arts? The answer is not far to seek. Our contact with the West and the education we received from the modern schooling have rendered us to forget that art itself is a language to convey thought to those familiar with it. Since

it is a language, if persons should have become indifferent to or defective of understanding of its nuances completely, inevitably there will result ignorance. Ananda Coomaraswamy explains it again : "Further it is possible to understand a familiar dialect of such a language and not understand a dialect that is unfamiliar" (Arts and Swadesi, 158). Our present-day difficulty for full comprehension of Indian Art is due in a great measure to our having become aliens in our own land. Moreover, even to the extent to which Westerners in general try to understand any kind of visual art, we fail to receive the same pleasure from them. Apart from the single instance of music, there has been no continuity of interest in any of the *fine arts* during the vicissitudes of our political fortunes. Even in the case of dance which has had a sudden spurt of interest recently in our country, there existed for nearly more than half a century much aversion which was explained as due to the stigma associated with the dancers belonging to a particular community. An anti-naught movement also became rampant to discourage education in dancing. Cultivated groups with taste for finer points of artistic creations grew rare and everything of delicate workmanship in handicrafts got neglected.

Till Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy began his dedicated mission of discovering to the world and particularly to Indians the wealth of art lying buried in our wonderful monuments in stone and colour, people hardly realised the appalling neglect we were guilty of for successive generations. His earliest visits to the remains of architecture and sculpture in Ceylon opened his eyes to a great heritage of both India and Ceylon. His next attempt was to collect art treasures of every kind, sculpture, painting, icon, handicrafts and whatever indicated an undying art in our homes and public places. In 1910, at the Indian National Congress held at Allahabad, he was chief-in-charge of the section of an Exhibition of arts and curios. He was standing at the gate robed in complete Indian fashion with lace turban and Angavastram and guiding people to the various spots of interest. He toured the whole of India in order to glean as much as possible fine examples of both plastic and pictorial Indian Art and prepared an appeal to the public for support of his idea for housing in a permanent abode such valuable art-treasures as he could gather. But unfortunately his appeal fell on deaf ears, and so when he joined the staff of the Boston Museum of fine arts and became its Curator, he naturally placed them there. From then onwards he made it a sacred purpose of his life to devote all his available time to a deep study of the peculiarities of Indian Art with its different schools in painting extant in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the second decade of this century, he came out with a portfolio of examples of art-plates containing forty-two of them and intended them to be distributed among the youth of the land both in colleges and schools.

He was unusually possessed of a critical acumen for things of art not only of India but of several other countries of the world, such as Europe, Japan,

China and Malaya. His linguistic equipment in many of the languages of Europe and of the East, gave him confidence to gain first-hand knowledge of various theories of art. Though born of an English mother and to a Ceylonese father, his early aptitude for art, and his education in the modern sciences provided him with a balance of outlook unimpaired by any of the prejudices, heir to a foreign education in the formative years of youth. If it is true a poet is born and not made, so also a *Rasika* of Ananda Coomaraswamy's type could not have been made but should have received the *Vasanas* of a former birth. Else, such an amount of penetration into our philosophy, ethics and scriptural learning, apart from a capacity for original interpretation of the underlying meaning of sculpture and painting, could not have inspired him to write book after book and monograph after monograph for disseminating throughout the world a correct knowledge of Indian Art.

In approaching Indian Art, Ananda Coomaraswamy's insistence on the spectator's sufficiency in sympathy and culture may at the outset appear questionable. His answer to doubters is contained in his brief but adequate introduction to the MIRROR OF GESTURE (*Abhinaya Darpana*) produced in collaboration with Duggirila Gopalakrishnayya of Andhra Desa. Though a dance treatise, it must be noted, that initial understanding is a common requirement for all our arts and therefore it is relevant in the context. He wrote: "It is needless to say that the appeal of the Indian actors' art can only be felt by a cultivated audience: The Indian artist is a professional, and he works for an audience of unsparing critics and according to Indian view, the power to express aesthetic emotion is inborn; it cannot be acquired by mere study, being the reward of merit in a former life" (*Mirror of Gesture: Introduction: 20*). One need not despair that it is a very unusual requisite; for, a Western writer like William Blake has echoed similar feelings when he uttered: 'Knowledge of ideal beauty is not to be acquired. It is inborn with us'. (cited in *Mirror of gesture: 21*).

Coomaraswamy will not stop with this but add further that "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" (*Ibid: 21*). In our theories of poetics, we have a statement in the commentary '*LOCHANA*' of *DHVANYALOKA*, to the same effect that the 'True form of art (*Saraswati*) is that of both the artist and the *Sahridaya* (enjoyer of art)'

सरस्वत्यास्तत्त्वं कविसहृदयाख्यं विजयते ।

(*Dhvanyaloka*, Ch. I verse 1).

The Hindu conception of art was not of a mere expression of an individual but of a community which has had through a long course of history

shaped a tradition and insisted upon strict conformity to it. It excludes any possibility of an individual's exhibition of personal taste and imagination in the creation of a work of art. Beauty is discerned in a work of art, say an icon, only when it conforms to *Sastra* or rules of representation. The limitations and discipline born of rules of image-making and plastic moulding bear much their influence on the excellence of the production. Religion, science and art, so much differentiated in the present day have not been distinguished as several standpoints but are inseparably united, and this synthesis has been a distinct contribution of the Hindu view of art. As an illustration, the Nataraja image in the dancing pose has been visualised by Ananda Coomaraswamy as providing a shining example of this remarkable synthesis. He said: "in the night of Brahma Nature is inert and cannot dance till Shiva wills it. He rises from His stillness, and dancing, sends through matter pulsating waves of awakening sound, proceeding from the drum; then nature also dances appearing about Him as glory (Tiruvasi). . . . The orderly dance of spheres, the perpetual movement of atoms, evolutions and involutions, are conceptions that have at all times recurred to men's minds; but to represent in the visible form of Nataraja's dance is a unique and magnificent achievement of the Indians" (Arts and Crafts of India, Ceylon, 18). Continuing, he interpreted the inner significance of the Lord's Dance thus "In the fulness of time, still dancing, He destroys all forms and names by the fire, and gives new rest. This is poetry, but none the less science" (Dance of Shiva 95).

Indian Art is subtle and profound as well, in its expression. The diletante with a smattering of the rules of perspective, proportion and anatomy will hardly be attracted to it. His criticism will lack appreciation of its vital quality of an enduring message. We know that all art has to be suggestive and conventional in some degree. If the Indian artist, faithful to tradition and symbolic formulae, can invest in images divine attributes which will be perceptible to the Indian people with their age-old culture and their 'unlettered yet educated' minds, he can be said to have fulfilled his main purpose. It may be a little difficult in the early stages of our education in art-appreciation to become fully aware of the inner meaning in a work of art. For that, a certain amount of sympathy is necessary at the outset. Otherwise the tendency to dismiss Indian Art as decorative in content and nothing more will be our reaction. To overcome such a disinclination the proper way to begin with will be to know what according to Indian outlook is the concept of beauty. The measure of success in bringing out beauty depends upon the spectator as much as on the artist. In a masterly essay on the HINDU VIEW OF ART, Ananda Coomaraswamy has dealt with the theory of Rasa. Rasa is the term used in Indian rhetorics to signify aesthetic emotion. An equivalent in English is not easy of obtaining to describe *Rasāvādhana* or the experiencing of beauty. In the Sahitya Darpana, a work

attributed to a medieval writer, Visvanatha, the author tries to make an attempt to describe its nature. It says:

सत्त्वोद्रेकादखण्डस्वप्रकाशानन्दचिन्मयः ।
वेद्यान्तरस्पर्शशून्यो ब्रह्मा स्वादसहोदरः ॥

(Sahitya Darpana, III paricheda,
Verse 2).

“The function of flavour is theirs whose knowledge of absolute values is innate; it is self-revealed as an intellectual ecstasy (ananda cin-maya) devoid of conceptual contacts, at the summit of being; born of one mother with the fruition of God, life is as it were a flash of blinding lightening of transmundane origin, impossible to analyse and yet in the likeness of our being”. (Footnote to introduction, *Mirror of Gesture*, 21). The translation in English is Ananda Coomaraswamy's own and from the way it has been done, one can easily imagine the depth of his knowledge in matters of philosophy and art.

Even as love is a subjective experience for the lover, even as Truth is to be realised subjectively by the philosopher, so is beauty an experience for the Rasika. But the artist has his work of art through which he can communicate his emotional experience. Anything for that matter can become in his hands a source of such communication. Once the all-pervading Brahman is conceived as the sole purpose of all communications, then no more does he hesitate about delivering his own reaction to life. Big or small, rock or cave, canvas or wall, all are equally of help to his attempt at communication of the Truth. As Tulsi Das sang “He comes to us in any form, anyhow and anywhere” (*Livery of Eve* by F.W. Bain, Introduction X). The monuments which speak of this power of communication from Ellora or Ajanta adequately confirm the efficacy of this philosophy. It is not only massive stones but minute designs carved on temple cornices and pillar-tops which speak the same language. The perennial message is that beauty which is communicated is non-physical and far beyond definition in words. Ananda Coomaraswamy calls it as “super-sensuous, Hyper-physical and the only proof of its reality is to be found in experience” (*Dance of Shiva*, 135). Poet Tagore has almost said the same but in his own manner. He said: “Self-forgetting, and in a higher degree, self-sacrifice is our acknowledgement of this our experience of the infinite. This is the philosophy which explains our joy in all arts that in their creations intensify the sense of unity which is the unity of Truth we carry with in ourselves” (*Comparative Indian Philosophy; Religion of the Artist*, 36).

Dhyāna or contemplation in an artist is referred to in all the texts on

Indian Art. The Sukra Nīti Sāra insists on meditation:

प्रतिमाकारको मर्त्यः यथा ध्यानपरो भवेत् ।
तथा नान्येन मार्गेण प्रत्यक्षेणापि वा खलु ॥

(Sukra. Ch. 4 Para-4, Verse 73,74).

(The image-maker should be expert in this visual contemplation, since thus, and in no other way, and verily not by direct observation can the end be achieved). The necessity for the artist to identify himself absolutely with his subject or merge his own consciousness in that aspect of nature which he wishes to interpret is emphasised. Direct observation is considered as of little efficacy to the image maker. Concentration during meditation is ordained for him to be pursued. It is yōga in other words. This meditation is common to all artists whether of poetry, dance, music, painting or sculpture when they start their endeavours. We have instances of Vālmiki and Vyāsa having entered upon Dhyāna before undertaking (to begin) their epics.

Religious scholasticism has such to do with creativity in art-productions. Tradition aided it further in its classification of forms and figures. The dancers, sculptors, poets and painters in the grip of tradition desired to make themselves a channel for the flow of ideas from a divine plane on to this earth. Hence Ananda Coomaraswamy would say that "it is hardly to be wondered at that the hieratic art of the Indians, as of the Egyptians, thus static and impersonal, should remain somewhat unapproachable to a purely secular consciousness".

Amateur Art, (as individual attempts at secular art are described) was not unknown to Indians. The Sanskrit dramas of poets like Bhāsa, Kālidāsa, Harsha and others bear evidences to princes and princesses indulging in painting physical representation of objects observed by them. Technically they are referred to in treatises like Abhilashitartha Chintamani as *Viddha*:

सादृश्यं लिख्यते यत्तु दर्पणे प्रतिबिम्बवत् ।
तच्चित्रं विद्धमित्याहुः विश्वकर्मादयो बुधा : ॥

(Wise men like Visvakarma describe a picture by the name *Viddha* which brings out exact likeness as reflection in a mirror). It is clear, therefore, art born of imagination along holds a high place in the Indian concept of art. Unless one is steeped in our culture and tradition, one may fail to seek what has to be seen in the art of our ancients. A picture fashioned in the Tanjore style of painting presents Lord Krishna standing under a spreading tree, cross-legged and with the flute laid to his lips. The surrounding herd

of cows and the cowherds are represented diminutively by the side of the big figure of Krishna as a child. Indeed the disproportion evident in the child's figure assuming a large size in contrast to the group around, normally would be deemed very wrong from the Western art point of view. But the very fact of this deliberate disproportion should lead us to entertain something of an inner meaning in the representation. The Lord is supreme and the living creatures lost in listening to the music of his flute are smaller in every way than the Godhead who has control over the entire creation of life and has caught them in the web of his *Leela*. Again, if the Dwārapalakas at the portals of temples are made of huge sizes with heavy maces held only by two of the fore-fingers of the right hand, the improbability of such a hold on the maces would normally be deemed as inexact to nature. But the artist has made us realise the effortless way in which such superhumans as the Dwarapalakas could wield the weapon of such heavy weight. Anything less would be only defeating the feeling of divine nature of awe of the sentinels at the gateway of Gods. Even if the bones and brawn had been accurately shown by the sculptor, the needed impression of divine beings wielding maces with ease and with no strain of body would not have been brought out. If Rādhā were to be shown as embracing the trunk of Tamāla tree, the Indian, steeped in the lore of his country, can alone understand the impression of Rādhā in her madness of love mistaking every dark hued object to be her darling Krishna. Often the faces of sculptured Gods wear a serenity of expression while their arms sometimes are engaged in strenuous activity such as killing an Asura or fighting an animal. The philosophy of the Gita of detachment of mind while striving in life cannot be better represented than in such faces indicating the unaffected mind during action without attachment for results.

If Ananda Coomaraswamy had not arisen amidst us as if from a sacrificial fire and tried to awaken our minds to the glories of a rare art, we should have been now practically dead to the wonder-world that is Indian Art. If today more and more of our educated persons begin to appreciate some of the art relics of our land, it is in no small measure to his unabating exhortation to recognise our ancient culture which formed the basis for an eternal philosophy inspiring every field of activity, and particularly the art of sculpture and painting.

He declared: "In any case whether we demand of art merely the reflection of ourselves, or the vision of something beyond us, it is certain that we must understand and recognise, if not accept the Indian (Hindu and Buddhist) ideal of character, and we must know something of the extent to which this character has been actually realised in life". Art and life are so organically merged with each other that to think of the one apart from the other will be suicidal to our culture. Let us remember the wisdom that lies deeply embedded in the words of this sage of modern times: "It is not so

much a question of establishing a new culture as one of preserving what we already have". No truer message has been uttered in recent times. (Speech at Boston 1947).

K. Chandrasekharan is a renowned authority on music and dance and a member of the Experts' Committee, Music Academy, Madras. He is author of several papers and articles on music and dance.