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Abstract: Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy is widely recognized as one of twentieth century’s most learned authorities on Indian Art. Having lived through an age when Indian Art was being scoffed at as something monstrous and ugly, he is credited with opening the eyes of the west to the true nature of Indian Art deeply rooted in Religion and Philosophy. Coomaraswamy’s background training as a Scientist leading up to a Doctorate in Geology no doubt helped him hone his skills in research. His contributions in identifying, describing and collecting cultural artefacts and his writings regarding them and on wider subjects such as Religion and Philosophy earned him a unique place in the annals of Art History. Coomaraswamy’s writings also had its critics. This Article explores AKC’s contributions and also discusses some of the criticisms levelled against his writings.

Keywords: Indian Art History, Religion, Geological Science, Philosophy

I. Introduction

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (AKC) (1877-1947) is celebrated as one of the top-ranking historians of Indian Art the world has ever seen. He was a scientist by training, and later became a religious scholar and philosopher. The well-known German Indologist, Heinrich Zimmer has said “Ananda Coomaraswamy is that noble scholar upon whose shoulders we are still standing”. AKC’s achievements and contributions have been highlighted as follows: “The ‘rehabilitation’ of Asian art in the eyes of Europeans and Asians alike; the massive scholarship which he pursued as curator.; the penetration and explanation of traditional views of art and their relationship to philosophy, religion and metaphysics.”

II. Early life

AKC’s life and work could be viewed against a backdrop of two factors, his personal history and development punctuated with publications, and the social milieu in which he was functioning. His multifaceted writings according to one biographer spanned 95 volumes and over 900 articles. Born to a Hindu Tamil father who hailed from an established family in Jaffna, Srilanka and Lady Elizabeth Beeby, a lady in waiting on Queen Victoria. AKC’s father Sir Mutthu Coomaraswamy, was the first Hindu to be called to the English bar and was a member of the British Parliament. He died when AKC was coming up to three. The widowed mother and young AKC returned to England, and he began his education in a private school in Gloucestershire. His interest in Geology must have started early for even as a student he was commended for his essay on Geology in the school magazine. This was a harbinger of what was to come later. He was known for his prolific writing to scientific journals on aspects of Geology.

III. Training and work as a Geologist

He graduated from the London University in Geology and Botany with first class honours and was drawn to Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was then, when only 22. Three years later he was appointed Director of the Mineralogical Survey in Ceylon. His pioneering work included being involved in the discovery of two minerals Serendibite and Thorianite. He was too humble not to get his own name in some form for these newly discovered minerals. He was however honoured later by his colleagues in Geology who named another discovery in the mica group of minerals Anandite.

He received a Doctorate in Science from the University of London. AKC arrived back in Ceylon in March 1903 and his assignment lasted three years. His work often involved travel to remote areas of the island, sometimes deep into the jungles barefooted, braving wild animals, adverse weather and diseases such as malaria were rampant. He was in search of mineral deposits, but quite accidentally also came across objects of archaeological importance. Being trained in systematic science and taxonomy helped him in his collection of curios. He also came into close contact with rural communities. Apart from his interests in geology
he began a detailed study of indigenous arts and crafts and became very disturbed by “the withering blight of Occidental industrialism”. The seeds for his involvement in social reform and *philosophia perennis* were perhaps sown here. He later became the President of the Ceylon Society of Social Reform. The interests in Art and Archaeology led to the publication of two of his early works, *Visvakarma* (a collection of examples of Indian architecture, sculpture, painting and handicrafts) and *Medieval Sihglese Art.*

### IV. Research in India

He subsequently began extensive travel and study in India. His later writings give clear and authoritative descriptions of the Art and Architecture of Sanchi and Amaravathi. The origins of early Buddha images at Gandhara and Mathura was being hotly debated around that time. European scholars such as Alfred Foucher were reluctant to acknowledge the independence and skills of Indian sculptors and seemed overly keen to give credit to Hellenistic influences. However, AKC countered this and “rejected the authority of Gandharan imagery and claimed primacy for the Mathura Buddha”. He had an excellent collection of Indian Art and sought assistance from the British Government in India to set up a museum, but this was declined. He returned to the UK and settled down in a Chapel in Gloucestershire where he began further writing. His book *Rajput Paintings* and *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* were produced here.

AKC writing about an Indian Temple traces the history of its development and emphasises the altar as the most important part. It is the hearth in which offerings are made to an invisible presence that may or may not be represented iconographically. It is not possible to establish with certainty as to when image worship housed in a temple began in India. In the early centuries AD, worship of sculpted images became popular among cults which probably merged in to later forms of Hinduism. From the vast confluence of beliefs and practices which is broadly termed Hinduism, two religions which were initially atheistic emerged. These were Buddhism and Jainism. These developed through monasticism and discouraged image worship. However, historically the earliest monumental architecture was a Buddhist development, and later years saw Buddhist Viharas, Stupas and iconography grow. Jain temples too with their own icons and style developed. Apart from developments in architecture temples became a “canvas for the visual arts, a stage for the performing arts”. AKC was keenly interested in all these areas and produced work that has become legendary. Mitter sums it up saying that “the marriage of art and religion was to form the pivot of his Art theory”. When AKC refused to join the army on the grounds that India was still not an independent nation, he was exiled from the British Commonwealth. What was Britain’s loss was a massive gain to the U.S.? He moved to Boston with his collections, and in 1917 was appointed “Keeper of Indian and Mohammedan Art” at the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Arts there. A sharp and inquisitive mind helped by the rigorous training in scientific analysis no doubt fired AKC’s enthusiasm to discover, study, catalogue and at times even acquire items for a personal collection.

### V. Curator in Boston USA

In Boston he continued his research and writing and published two momentous books, *Dance of Siva*, a collection of fourteen essays and the *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*. He appears to have become more and more engaged in the “search of scriptures of all the orthodox traditions in order to penetrate the unanimity of their teachings” which resulted in noteworthy works on Art and Religion.

In his Historical Note, Rasoul Sorkhabi sketches the background that prevailed in the world during the AKC years. He writes “humanity suffered two world wars, West-East tensions were high (the Indian Liberation movement being a notable example) and Asian countries were struggling in varying degrees between tradition and modernity, science and religion, as well as between nationalism and internationalism”. A meeting in 1910 at the Royal Asiatic Society was chaired by Sir George Birdwood, a medical doctor by background, who had also made significant contributions on the study of Industrial Art in India. Sadly, Sir George was also known for acidic comments. When Ernest Havell, one-time Superintendent of the Madras School of Art and later of the Government School of Art in Calcutta, presented a study on the Art and Symbolism of a Statue of Buddha, Sir George’s response was: “a boiled suet pudding would serve equally as a symbol of passionless purity and serenity of soul”. With regard to AKC’s work it was not all hostility. There were plenty in the west who longed to learn more about Indian temples which were repositories of exquisite art. Take for example the French Nobel laureate, Romain Rolland who wrote the foreword for AKC’s book *The Dance of Shiva*. He asks in relation to Europe, “what benefits has she drawn from Asia’s spiritual wealth, that lain buried in collections and archaeological museums?”.

### VI. Religion and Philosophy

AKC’s work with respect to the structure of the Indian Temple merits special consideration. He emphasized that “the body of the temple and the universe are analogous”, “the temple is a microcosm, and man too is a microcosm, ‘a holy temple’”. He refers to the Sun as the gateway or door to liberation, where the sky is the roof of the world and a central axis, the axis mundi connects the universe with its creator. He describes the presence of an opening at the summit of Indian lithic structures, which even when closed by a structure such as the *amalaka* has a
perforation which prolongs the finial in the central axis and maintains the hypaethral principle. This analogy is taken further with the cranial foramen at the top of the head is compared to the opening in the roof, and refers to the brahmamandala described in Vedic literature. AKC concludes saying, “we are again brought back to the concept of three analogous ‘houses’ – bodily, architecturally and cosmic, that the spirit of life inhabits and fills. We recognize at the same time the values of the oldest architectural symbolism preserved in the latest buildings and serve to explain their use”.10 This approach to the Indian Temple has also been the subject of Stella Kramrich’s writings. Writing with respect to the Temple as Purusa, she refers to the Amalaka as the High Dome and its brahmamandara or foramen is pierced so as to receive the tenon (kila) of the finial (stupika).11 More recently Heather Elgood, with reference to Temple Symbolism recounts AKC’s view that “the worshipper, consciously or unconsciously re-enacts a ritual of symbolic self-sacrifice, and the symbolic ascent of the worshipper (following his immolation) from the sanctum through the tower and the finial at its apex”.12 Coomaraswamy had likened this theoretical exit from chamber to finial to the cranial foramen in man, and the ancient Hindu ritual of breaking it open prior to cremation.

AKC also contributed to the study of Art in Jaina temples. Richard J Cohen who provided the Introduction to AKC’s book on Jaina Art says “Coomaraswamy created a firm foundation for further study of Jaina Art, particularly Jaina Painting”, and goes on to say that AKC was “decades ahead of his time”, and declares “we find confirmation of Coomaraswamy’s prophetic role in the study of Jaina Art with the publication by W. Norman Brown’s Kālaṇkaṇaṇaraṇaṇa in 1933 and Kalpasutra in 1934.”13 Was AKC’s work received universally without any criticism? Far from it. Roger Lipsey in his biography of AKC divides his writings into two groups, namely calm and restless. The historical writings, for example on the Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon show calmness and lucidity, while his writings on contemporary problems are “restless and unrealistically demanding”. Partha Mitter refers to AKC’s writings becoming progressively idealistic. For AKC “Art is religion and religion Art, not related but the same.” Partha Mitter says “although AKC may have started with a descriptive, anthropological approach, this was abandoned in favour of a mystical one”.14 AKC believed that artists resorted to a specialized yoga technique which helped the transformation of an inner image in to an art form. Adam Hardy has also been sceptical about AKC’s view that Indian Art is “an embodiment of the universal Perennial Philosophy” and is divinely revealed via ‘pure intellect’ or supra-individual buddhi. For Partha Mitter, AKC’s views were “reactions of a Westernized Indian, as opposed to those of an orthodox one, and belong more appropriately to European intellectual history than to an Indian tradition”. Mitter goes on to say that AKC’s views “reduced art criticism to irrational mysticism”.

VII. On the Cosmic Dance

It was AKC’s seminal essay on Siva’s Cosmic Dance that was a trail blazer for western thought, including those of leading scientists who say that “the metaphor of the cosmic dance has found its most profound and beautiful expression in Hinduism in the image of dancing God Shiva”. Shiva’s dance in the words of AKC is “the clearest image of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of”. For many top scientists such as Fritjof Capra, an Austrian born American physicist, based in Berkeley California “Shiva’s dance is the dance of subatomic matter”. He is fully concordant with AKC’s observation that “the metaphor of the cosmic dance thus unifies ancient mythology, religious art and modern physics” and AKC’s description that it is “poetry but none the less science”.15

In her paper on Shiva Nataraja, Padma Kaimal Professor at Colgate University, Hamilton, New York asks whether it was AKC’s essay on “The Dance of Shiva” that gave the concept a disproportionate degree of popularity. She challenges AKC’s interpretation on three counts. Firstly, whether the objects original meaning can be fully recovered due to the dearth of evidence surviving from medieval South India, secondly whether the meaning of images have remained static and thirdly she believes that the textual evidence used by AKC was not totally convincing. The texts she says were written several centuries after the sculptors had originally represented the deity in bronze and stone.16

VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, while there is no doubt that AKC was one of those scholars “primarily responsible for laying the foundations on which the present art-historical scholarship concerning India rests”, there are those who question whether experts like AKC could explain the precise relationship between art and religion without recourse to metaphysical generalizations that originated not only from Plato but from Romantic aestheticians of the nineteenth century.

References


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