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ART AS A SOURCE OF HISTORY (ANANDA K. COOMARASWAMY'S CONTRIBUTION TO WRITING OF THE HISTORY OF INDIA)

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ABSTRACT

From many sources materials are gathered for writing of history. Every existence has a history behind it. Existence may be of two types – abstract and concrete. Example for the former is thought and for the latter a political event. History of anything means the cause for its emergence, its growth, its development, its continued existence, or its decay, and its disappearance etc.. etc. Generally speaking the task of history is to find them, to explain them, to present them, if possible in chronological order. There is no universal acceptability of the historical conclusions due to a variety of reasons- for example, rejection of sources made use of as irrelevant, the discovery of new sources, the importance given to the sources being challenged etc.. etc. Of the benefits of the history the most important is to understand the present. Political events are not the only history of a nation, but its culture also. Through its culture it has its continued existence, its differentiating identity is preserved. A culture is arts and religion. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy has made use of art and religion as sources of the cultural history of India in particular.

Keywords: Source, Culture, Arts, Religion.

Tagore says "Whatever we call him – an art-critic or a historian or even a scholar – we find something is left over, something in his work, which in the last analysis is undefinable. Dr. Coomaraswamy exceeds all our definitions. All our definitions fall far short of his actual work. He is always something else."[1] This paper deals with Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's writings on the history of India making use of art as a source of history.

His books 'An Introduction to Indian Art', 'Medieval Sinhalese Art', 'Rajput Painting', 'History of Indian and Indonesian Art', and 'The Origin of the Buddha Image' deal with art as a source of history. This article is an analysis of the source.

"It is sometimes said that the Indians have left no history; but what else than history is any work of traditional art? Of such art we can at least say that it is not a product of chance, but is

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determined by antecedent racial *karma*, and cannot be detached from the life it expresses. These drawings answer for us a whole series of questions as to what manner of men so spoke and what manner of life they sought to praise. From these heads, so serene, so confidently poised, from these sensitive expressive hands, these white and gold and coloured muslins we can reconstruct, as it were from the buried fragments of an ancient textile, the whole pattern of the Rajput civilization – simple, aristocratic, generous, and self-sufficient. No other evidence than this is needed to establish the magnificence of that old Hindu world that is vanishing before our eyes at the present day in a tornado of education and reform"[2].

Medieval Sinhalese gives an account of the structure of the Medieval Sinhalese society and status of the craftsmen. 'The Origin of the Buddhist Image' and the 'Elements of the Buddhist Iconography' trace the division of two forms of Buddhism.

'Medieval Sinhalese Arts' was published in 1914-really "a pioneer work, as a contribution to the understanding of the ideals of the past of India for understanding and revitalizing of the national Sinhalese people"[3]. The book has seventeen chapters, each one having appendix and illustrations. Beginning with history of Sinhalese people in brief it deals with architecture, wood work, stone work, lac work, earthen work, weaving, embroidery, metal work, jewelry, mat weaving and dying. The last chapter history of Sinhalese the elements which have gone to the building of the tradition of Sinhalese arts and crafts. It is clear that we have to consider the following elements which have, or may have, gone to the building up of the traditions of Sinhalese arts and crafts as they existed in late medieval times:- the art of indigenous peoples, pre-Vijayan 'Yakkhas'; the art brought by the Vijayan immigrants the art brought with Buddhism and the Asokan culture from N. India; the influence Dravidian art in early times, and at subsequent periods; the influence of Muhammad art; of Chinese and Malayan; and finally of Portuguese, Dutch, and English.

The history of Sinhalese art in post-Asokan and in medieval times is mainly one of continual action and interaction with India. During the whole of this period, and until the close of the period of medieval conditions, the relations between France and England; continually fluctuating intimate intercourse, now friendly, now hostile, migration of craftsmen to centers of civic activity, or to abandoned sites rebuilt by victorious kings, sometimes with the capture of craftsmen amongst other prisoners; sometimes their importation. Throughout this intercourse, India remained the exhaustless reservoir from which Ceylon was able to draw, whenever it became necessary to renew the traditions which fell into decay in Ceylon, as was from time to time the case. This process of renewal is well brought out in the Janavamsa accounts of the history of the crafts in Ceylon. Its results are equally evident in the community of motifs in Sinhalese and Dravidian art. The system of teaching drawing is Dravidian, and many common elements of design have been noticed in Chapter IV. A striking instance is afforded by the tree of

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life in a garlanded frame, P1. XIV., which is identical in design with the decoration of South Indian palampores. The forms of jewellery, as well as the 'gold leaf' technique (*tahadu kold bema*) are of South Indian origin. It is by no means easy always to say whether a given piece of jewellery is of South Indian or Sinhalese manufacture[4].

To reconstruct the vernacular culture history of Hindustan is not easy. It is, however, a matter of moment for our study to determine its main outlines; and in doing this we shall find our best guide in the history of literature.

Coomaraswamy has written extensively on Vedic and Buddhist religions. His contribution to the study of the historical development of different forms of Indian religious systems is indeed substantial. According to him, the beginnings of Buddhist art should be associated with the memorial monuments (chaityas) erected on the sites of the four great events (Nativity, Enlightenment, First Preaching and Decease) of the Buddha's life, and in other places. The process of the deification of the Buddha began as early as the second century B. C. At Bharhut numerous medallions illustrate the Jataka stories; reliefs illustrate historical episodes of the Buddha's[5].

The very name of the book 'The history of Indian Indonesian art' tells what is about it. A massive study divided into six part with an exceptive bibliography, containing 126 illustrations with descriptions. It has to be noted for writing his book "the author as personally visited, often on several accusation, and most of the sights and museums referred to"[6].

Inasmuch as neither the Upanisads nor Buddhism nor Jainism, considered in their original character as systems of thought, contemplated the worship (*puja*) of any personal deity, it may well be asked how it came to pass that Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism alike became "*idolatrous*" religions. The answer to this question was admirably expressed by Jacobi over forty years ago. "I believe that this worship had nothing to do with original Buddhism or Jainism, that it did not originate with the monks, but with the lay community, when the people in general felt the want of a higher cult than that of their rude deities and demons, when the religious development of India found in Bhakti the supreme means of salvation. Therefore instead of seeing in the Buddhists the originals and in the Jainas the imitators, with regard to erection of temples and worship of statues, we assume that both sects were, independently to each other, brought to adopt this practice by the perpetual and irresistible influence of the religious development of the people India."[7]

Again, the earlier Indian types are products, not of observations, but of cerebration; they are mental abstractions. As Indian culture became more conscious, racial taste was more and more a determining factor in such abstractions. That the model upon which the artist worked was regarded from the standpoint of knowledge, and not of observation, is reflected in the use of

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sadhanas or *dhyana mantrams*, which constitute the main part of the *silpa sastras* so far as they are concerned with the making of cult images. No natural form is imitated merely because it is present in nature; on the contrary, all the formulae of art are as much *samskriam* as Sanskrit itself, and every phrase was intended to have a definite significance. Of course, the art as develops, comes to have an appearance of greater "truth to nature;" the actuality and spontaneity of the Ajanta paintings, for example, have an unsophisticated art, like that of those who take nature for their model. The Indian theory of knowledge, as M. Masson – Oursel has pointed out amounts to this, that objects are created by thought, not that preexisting objects are perceived. Hence the importance of correct thought; and this in relation to art is theoretically a matter of revelation, and secondarily, one of tradition. The forms created by correct thought need not by any necessity conform to those perceived in nature by untrained perception; all that is necessary is that they should be consistent and significant[8].

A GREAT art-historian and art-critic though, Coomaraswamy was never confined to a particular area academically as well as personally. He was truly a universal man with a cosmopolitan outlook. He did not consider the study of art as an end in itself, nor did he believe in art for art's sake. According to him, the study of art in itself is of no value unless it is used as a means to understand the way of life, the pattern of social and cultural developments and the world-view, in their totality, of a given nation. Hence he thought it necessary to correlate the study of art to language, literature, history, anthropology, philosophy, religion and other disciplines[9].

Leaving aside the debatable issues of Coomaraswamy's characterization of the Harappan civilization as 'Indo-Sumerian' and his identification of its authors with the Dravidians, credit is to be given to Coomaraswamy for stressing the basic difference between the two main trends of subsequent Indian religious thought and culture-the Vedic and non-Vedic. In fact, in his significant work entitled the *Yaksas* (pt. I. 1928) he has furnished details of the pre-Vedic and non-Vedic religious beliefs and practices like the cults of the phallus and of the mother-goddess, of Yakshas, Rakshasas, Nagas and other Nature-spirits and their contributions to the growth of subsequent religious ideas[10].

AKC offers a refutation of the propounded by Alfred Foucher that the Indian Buddha type is of Hellenistic origin. Drawing upon verbal and plastic evidences AKC argues "that practically every element essential to the iconography of Buddha and Bodhisattva figures appears in early Indian art before the Buddha figure of Gandhara or Mathura is known" (p.313). As AKC remarks elsewhere, "The Gandharan sculptor … did not so much make an Apollo into a Buddha, as a Buddha into an Apollo" (History of Indian and Indonesian Art (1927)-A50-p.52). The thesis is expounded under six headings: 1. What is the Buddha Image? - 2. The Early Representation of Deities by Means of Symbols – 3. The Necessity for Buddha Image- 4. Elements of the Later Anthropomorphic Iconography Already Present - 5. Style and Content: Differentiation of Indian

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and Hellenistic Types- 6. Dating of Gandhara and Mathura Buddhas. There is a descriptive list of the plates, and an "Appendix" which comprises quotations selected to illustrate "the psychology of those whose devotional feelings led to the use of Buddha images" (p. 327). Foodnote 45 on p.309, discusses the significance of the "lotus" in Indian art. AKC assumes that the reader of this article is familiar with his earlier "The Indian Origin of the Buddha Image" (1926).

There are two forms of Buddhism – Mahayana and Hinayanam. The history of the division has been trace – of course incidentally –in 'The Origin of the Buddhist Image' and 'The Elements of the Buddhist Iconography'.

It should be observed that while the Gandharan Buddha (figs.89, 90, 94) is stylistically Hellenistic, it follows Indian tradition, verbal or plastic, in every essential of its iconography. The whole conception of the Indian Yaksas afford a prototype for the standing fiures. The *usnisa* is found already at Bodhgaya, the lotus seat at sand; indeed, the Gandharan type of lotus, resembling a prickly artichoke, is far from realizing the Indian idea of a firm and comfortable (*sthirasukha*) seat, and this is really due to the misunderstanding of a purely Indian idea Nor can the *mudras, abbaya* and *dhyana* for example, be anything but Indian. All that is really Hellenistic is the plasticity; the Gandharan sculptor, even supposing his priority in time, did not so much make an Apollo into a Buddha, as a Buddha into an Apollo. He may not have copied any Indian sculpture, but his Buddha type and that of Mathura are equally based on a common literary and oral tradition.

Bhakti, as is well known, means loving devotion, loyalty, attachment, service to one who is Bhagavata, worshipful, adorable, Lord, and he who feels such devotion and is devoted to any such being, is called *Bhagavata* or *Bhakta*. The conception comes into prominence together with, and is inseparably bound up with, the development of theistic cults in India, as these are with the making of images and the building of temples. Theistic elements are recognizable in the Upanisads; the development, as proved by the inscription of Heliodora, who calls himself a Bhagavata, with reference to Visnu, was already advanced in the second century B. C.[11]

It is very rarely that an art scholar gets involved with the generative roots of art as Ananda Coomaraswamy did. Most scholars are satisfied to make descriptive or classificatory studies of art objects, their stylistic features, their historical antecedents, their chronological sequence, their interdependence and, less frequently, their functional and ideational back ground. But this was not enough for Ananda Coomaraswamy. In fact he was rather critical of art historians whose studies "penetrate no further than analysis of styles," and of contact with art critics who were content with a contact with "aesthetic surfaces". In return some art historians have regretted Coomaraswamy's inordinate involvement with the conceptual roots of art and his expository polemics. Whatever this may be it is this particular involvement that makes him out from other

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art scholars and makes him a challenging personality, and makes, for us, an encounter with the main corpus of his ideas an invigorating exercise[12].

Finally, it may be observed that it is perfectly legitimate to consider works of art from other than aesthetic standpoints, if we are quite clear that in so doing we are not contributing to aesthetic criticism. The Rajput drawings provide the Indianist with an encyclopedia of information on customs, costumes, architecture, and above all, religion; and they are well deserving of study from these standpoints alone. On many matters they are our only source of information. In especial, no study of Vaisnavism and Saivism can be complete without reference to the paintings, in which these systems are set forth as logically and as deliberately as in the corresponding literature.

In conclusion I would like to inform that my article consists of passages from AKC books without having quotation marks.

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