Ananda Coomaraswamy – a seer’s definition of the Nataraja

What does the plaque read? Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, seeing beyond the unsurpassed rhythm, beauty, power, grace of the Nataraja had said, ”It is the cleared image of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of.”

It is indeed difficult to comprehend the multifaceted genius of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. He was a renowned geologist, an art historian and art collector of large proportions. He was a polymath, philosopher of high repute and an esteemed patriot with an intense passion for swadeshi. He was above all, an intellectual who could debunk all Western theories that derogated Indian art and art history. Through his excellent self-taught scholarship. The impact and influence of his scholarly interpretations of Indian art and culture were so powerful that they could transform the Western mindset even during the hostile pre-independence decade. Yet, notwithstanding, very little is known about Coomaraswamy’s efforts. Very few know about his contribution in bringing back the lost glory and aura to our history, heritage, art, and culture.

Coomaraswamy was born in the erstwhile Ceylon (today’s Sri Lanka) on 22 August 1877, to Muttur Sri Ramachandra, a learned and brilliant Tamil lawyer and his British wife, Elizabeth Beeby. Named Ananda by his father at a very early age of two. He was then taken to England by his mother. She imparted basic Hindu values of life to little Ananda, thus, shaping and filling his mind with sublime reverence, rightful pride for his own history, heritage and culture. Coomaraswamy studied geology and botany at the University of London and later, returned to Ceylon to serve the Geological Survey of Ceylon. As a geologist, he was credited with the discovery of Thorianate and received a doctorate in science.

In today’s world, Nataraja, symbolizing Shiva’s dance of creation and destruction, has gained a significant and powerful new-age interpretation as a ‘modern thought’. The parallel between Shiva’s dance as Nataraja and the dance of subatomic particels was first discussed by famous scientist and artist, Fritz J. Capra in his article titled The Dance of Shiva: The Hindu View of Matter in the Light of Modern Physics. The article was published in the journal Main Mein in Modern Thought in 1972. Later in 1975, Capra’s international bestseller ‘The Tao of Physics’ had the Shiva’s cosmic dance as its central metaphor. It is worth mentioning that The Tao of Physics first published in 1975 is still in print with 43 languages and its translations in 23 languages.

The famous cosmologist, Carl Sagan too drew an interesting correlation between the theories of modern cosmology and dancing Shiva, Nataraja. In his famous book Cosmos, Sagan says, “The Hindu religion is the only one of the world’s great faiths dedicated to the idea that the Cosmos itself undergoes an immense, indeed an infinite, number of deaths and rebirths. It is the only religion in which the time scales correspond to those of modern scientific cosmology.”

A well-known authority on physical chemistry and Nobel laureate, Ilya Prigogine, who is also known as a poet of thermodynamics, could see the creation and destruction emerging from a common source. For him, Nataraja depicts that source which is perfectly balanced cosmic dance. Dr. VS Ramachandran, one of the leading neuroscientists of this age, while espousing the idea of neuroaesthetics, too cites how is the bronze sculpture of Nataraja. Sir Jacob Epstein, one of the pioneers of modern sculpture also says, “Shiva dances, creating the world and destroying it, his large rhythms conjure up vast aeons (aeons mean a period of one thousand million years) of time, and his movements have a relentless magical power of incantation. Our European allegories are banal and pointless by such a type as this, affording an image of reality, a key to the complex tissue of life, a theory of nature, not merely satisfactory to a single clique or race, nor acceptable to the thinkers of one century only, but universal in its appeal to the philosopher, the lover, and the artists all ages and all countries. How supremely great in power and grace this dancing image must appear to all those who’ve arisen in plastic forms to give expression to their intuition of life.”

Every part of such an image is this directly expressive, not of any mere superstition or dogma, but of evident facts. No artist of today, however, great, could more exactly or wisely create an image of that energy which science must postulate behind all phenomena. If we could reconcile Time with Eternity, we scarcely do so otherwise than by the conception of Walter Rhind who indicates the fundamentals of extending over vast regions of space and great tracts of time.

Especially significant, then, is the phase alteration implied by the drum, and the fire which changes, not destroys. These are but visual symbols of the theory of the day and night of Brahma……. In the night of Brahma, Nature is inert, and cannot dance till Shiva wills it. He rises from His rapture, and dancing sends through inert matter pulsing waves of awakening sound, and lo! the matter also dances appearing as a glory round about Him. Dancing, He submits His manifest phenomena, in the fullness of time, still dancing, He destroys all forms and names by fire and gives new real. This is poetry; but none the less, science.”

How close is this explanation of the modern theory of cosmology -- "Big Bang"? He kept on writing, reading, collecting, and exploring newer vistas of Indian art till he breathed his last.

In 2002, James Crouch published A Bibliography of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, an encyclopaedic list of 400 pages. Crouch says that this book documents the remarkably productive career of one of the great minds of the twentieth century. Fortunately, his painstaking endeavors did bear fruits of diligent research, and exploration. He explains the fundamental image of that energy which science must postulate behind all phenomena. If we could reconcile Time with Eternity, we scarcely do so otherwise than by the conception of Walter Rhind who indicates the fundamentals of extending over vast regions of space and great tracts of time.

What has India contributed to human welfare? The parallel between Shiva’s dance as Nataraja and the dance of subatomic particles is a fascinating saga! It is the cleared image of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of.