

**THE DANCE OF  
SIVA; FOURTEEN  
INDIAN ESSAYS**

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The dance of Siva; fourteen Indian essays by Ananda Coomaraswamy

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**ANANDA COOMARASWAMY**

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# THE DANCE OF ŚIVA

FOURTEEN INDIAN ESSAYS

BY

ANANDA COOMARASWAMY



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## CONTENTS

	PAGE
What Has India Contributed to Human Welfare? . . . . .	1
Hindu View of Art: Historical . . . . .	18
Hindu View of Art: Theory of Beauty . . . . .	30
That Beauty is a State . . . . .	38
Buddhist Primitives . . . . .	46
The Dance of Siva . . . . .	56
Indian Images With Many Arms . . . . .	67
Indian Music . . . . .	72
Status of Indian Women . . . . .	82
Sahaja . . . . .	103
Intellectual Fraternity . . . . .	112
Cosmopolitan View of Nietzsche . . . . .	115
Young India . . . . .	122
Individuality, Autonomy and Function . . . . .	137

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## LIST OF PLATES

	BETWEEN PAGES
Frontispiece—Cosmic Dance of Naṭarājā, 12th Century.	
I. <i>Figure a.</i> —Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, 8th Century. <i>Figure b.</i> —Śiva and Pārvati on Mt. Kailāsa, 8th Century . . . . .	24-25
II. <i>Figure a.</i> —Deer. Māmallapuram, 8th Century. <i>Figure b.</i> —Elephants, Māmallapuram, 8th Century . . . . .	26-27
III. Krishna Disguised as a Milkmaid, 17th Century . . . . .	28-29
IV. Ajaṅṭā Fresco, 6th or 7th Century . . . . .	40-41
V. <i>Figure a.</i> —Temple at Bādāmi, 8th Century. <i>Figure b.</i> —Monkey family. Māmallapuram, 8th Century . . . . .	42-43
VI. <i>Figure a.</i> —Seated Buddha, Gandhāra, 1st century, A.D. <i>Figure b.</i> —Dryad, Sānchī, 2nd century, B.C. <i>Figure c.</i> —Lay Worshippers at a Buddha Shrine, 2nd Century . . . . .	46-47
VII. Buddha in Samādhi . . . . .	48-49
VIII. Standing Bodhisattva, 2nd Century, A. D. . . . .	50-51
IX. Standing Buddha, Ceylon, 2nd Century, A. D. . . . .	52-53
X. Standing Buddha, 2nd century, A.D. . . . .	52-53
XI. Standing Images of Buddha, 2nd Century, A. D. . . . .	54-55
XII. Brahma, Elephanta, 8th Century . . . . .	66-67
XIII. Durgā as Chāṇḍī slaying Mahiṣa, 11th Century . . . . .	68-69
XIV. Death of Hiranyakaśipu. Elūra, 8th Century . . . . .	70-71
XV. 'Chamber-music of an aristocratic society,' 18th Century . . . . .	72-73
XVI. Ratan Devi . . . . .	74-75
XVII. Todī Rāgiṇī (a musical mode), 16th Century . . . . .	76-77
XVIII. Madhu-mādhavi Rāgiṇī (a musical mode), 16th Century . . . . .	78-79
XIX. Todī Rāgiṇī (a musical mode), 18th Century . . . . .	80-81
XX. A Hindu lady at her toilet, 18th Century . . . . .	84-85
XXI. Chānd Bibī, called Chānd Sultān, 18th Century . . . . .	86-87
XXII. Hindu Marriage, about 1600 A. D. . . . .	88-89
XXIII. Rādhā in her kitchen, Krishna at the window, 1st Century . . . . .	90-91
XXIV. "Where each is both," 8th Century . . . . .	104-105
XXV. A School of Philosophy, 18th Century . . . . .	130-131
XXVI. <i>Figure a.</i> —One of the gates of Jaipur. <i>Figure b.</i> —Laying a warp in Madura . . . . .	132-133
XXVII. The Bathing Ghat at Benares . . . . .	134-135



## WHAT HAS INDIA CONTRIBUTED TO HUMAN WELFARE?<sup>1</sup>

Each race contributes something essential to the world's civilization in the course of its own self-expression and self-realization. The character built up in solving its own problems, in the experience of its own misfortunes, is itself a gift which each offers to the world. The essential contribution of India, then, is simply her Indianness; her great humiliation would be to substitute or to have substituted for this own character (*sva-bhāva*) a cosmopolitan veneer, for then indeed she must come before the world empty-handed.

If now we ask what is most distinctive in this essential contribution, we must first make it clear that there cannot be anything absolutely unique in the experience of any race. Its peculiarities will be chiefly a matter of selection and emphasis, certainly not a difference in specific humanity. If we regard the world as a family of nations, then we shall best understand the position of India by recognizing in her the elder, who no longer, it is true, possesses the virility and enterprise of youth, but has passed through many experiences and solved many problems which younger races have hardly yet recognized. The heart and essence of the Indian experience is to be found in a constant intuition of the unity of all life, and the instinctive and ineradicable conviction that the recognition of this unity is the highest good and the uttermost freedom. 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 Rūmī—but nowhere else has it been made the essential basis of sociology and education.

Every race must solve its own problems, and those of its own day. I do not suggest that the ancient Indian solution of the special Indian problems, though its lessons may be many and valuable, can be directly applied to modern conditions. What I do suggest is that the Hindus grasped more firmly than others the fundamental meaning and purpose of life, and more deliber-

<sup>1</sup> First published in the 'Athenæum,' London, 1915.

ately than others organized society with a view to the attainment of the fruit of life; and this organization was designed, not for the advantage of a single class, but, to use a modern formula, to take from each according to his capacity, and to give to each according to his needs. How far the *ṛishis* succeeded in this aim may be a matter of opinion. We must not judge of Indian society, especially Indian society in its present moment of decay, as if it actually realized the Brahmanical social ideas; yet even with all its imperfections Hindu society as it survives will appear to many to be superior to any form of social organization attained on a large scale anywhere else, and infinitely superior to the social order which we know as "modern civilization." But even if it were impossible to maintain this view—and a majority of Europeans and of English-educated Indians certainly believe to the contrary—what nevertheless remains as the most conspicuous special character of the Indian culture, and its greatest signifi- cance for the modern world, is the evidence of a constant effort to understand the meaning and the ultimate purpose of life, and a purposive organization of society in harmony with that order, and with a view to the attainment of the purpose.<sup>1</sup> The Brahmanical idea is an Indian "City of the gods"—as *devanāgarī*, the name of the Sanskrit script, suggests. The building of that city anew is the constant task of civilization; and though the details of our plans may change, and the contours of our building, we may learn from India to build on the foundations of the religion of Eternity.

Where the Indian mind differs most from the average mind of modern Europe is in its view of the value of philosophy. In Europe and America the study of philosophy is regarded as an

<sup>1</sup> Lest I should seem to exaggerate the importance which Hindus attach to *Adhyātmā-vidyā*, the Science of the Self, I quote from the '*Bhagavad Gītā*,' ix. 2: "It is the kingly science, the royal secret, sacred surpassingly. It supplies the only sanction and support to righteousness, and its benefits may be seen even with the eyes of the flesh as bringing peace and permanence of happiness to men"; and from Manu, xii. 100: "Only he who knows the Vedaśāstra, only he deserves to be the Leader of Armies, the Wielder of the Rod of Law, the King of Men, the Suzerain and Overlord of Kings."

The reader who desires to follow up the subject of this essay is strongly recommended to the work of Bhagavan Das, '*The Science of Social Organization*,' London and Benares, 1910.

end in itself, and as such it seems of but little importance to the ordinary man. In India, on the contrary, philosophy is not regarded primarily as a mental gymnastic, but rather, and with deep religious conviction, as our salvation (*moksha*) from the ignorance (*avidyā*) which for ever 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. It is no wonder, then, that the Indians have pursued the study of philosophy with enthusiasm, for these are matters that concern all.

There is a fundamental difference between the Brahman and the modern view of politics. The modern politician considers that idealism in politics is unpractical; time enough, he thinks, to deal with social misfortunes when they arise. The same outlook may be recognized in the fact that modern medicine lays greater stress on cure than on prevention, *i. e.*, endeavours to protect against unnatural conditions rather than to change the social environment. The Western sociologist is apt to say: "The teachings of religion and philosophy may or may not be true, but in any case they have no significance for the practical reformer." The Brahmins, on the contrary, considered all activity not directed in accordance with a consistent theory of the meaning and purpose of life as supremely unpractical.

Only one condition permits us to excuse the indifference of the European individual to philosophy; it is that the struggle to exist leaves him no time for reflection. Philosophy can only be known to those who are alike disinterested and free from care; and Europeans are not thus free, whatever their political status. Where modern Industrialism prevails, the Brahman, Kshatriya, and Śūdra alike are exploited by the Vaishya,<sup>1</sup> and where in this way commerce settles on every tree there must be felt continual anxiety about a bare subsistence; the victim of Industry must confine his thoughts to the subject of to-morrow's food for himself and his family; the mere Will to Life takes precedence of the Will to Power. If at the same time it is decided that every man's voice is to count equally in the councils of the nation, it follows naturally that the voice of those who think must be

<sup>1</sup> Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Śūdra—the four primary types of Brahmanical sociology, *viz.*, philosopher and educator, administrator and soldier, tradesman and herdsman, craftsman and labourer.