

A NIETZSCHE FOR INDIA: A. K. COOMARASWAMY AND THE SUPERMEN IN THE WEST

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Abstract: This paper examines A. K. Coomaraswamy's understanding of Friedrich Nietzsche. In particular, it explores Coomaraswamy's translation of Nietzschean ideas within the framework of Indian religious and spiritual thought and the expansion of Nietzschean concepts into Indian nationalist cultural politics. The paper argues that in a series of essays, Coomaraswamy intended to generally locate in India the spiritual power and, particularly in the Rajput princess, the temporal power that Nietzsche sought in his ideological antidote to Western civilization. Coomaraswamy, however, far from privileging Nietzsche, actually subordinated and Indianized Nietzsche by arguing that Indian spiritual achievers have long existed in that space of freedom beyond good and evil that Nietzsche idolized and that therein is the source of spiritually superior action free from attachment, and resultant political freedom fed by this spirit.

There is extensive literature on Friedrich Nietzsche's theories about and understanding of India. Over time, there has been a slow but steadily growing body of analysis of this aspect of Nietzsche's work. Much of the analysis falls into two basic camps: Nietzsche misunderstands India, or Nietzsche, despite apparently talking about India, was not really talking about India. Both of these statements are true in some way, and they set the groundwork for the vast majority of work on Nietzsche and India. This paper takes a different approach to the relationship between India and Nietzsche by furthering work on a vastly understudied topic – the Indian understanding of Nietzsche. The author will explore the writings of the noted early twentieth-century Indian art historian, philosopher, and nationalist thinker A. K. Coomaraswamy. Coomaraswamy produced a series of essays that interpret Nietzsche spiritually within the framework of Indian religious achievers and politically within the framework of modern nationalist caste identity. Coomaraswamy's interpretation brings Nietzsche into India's spiritual and political world that Nietzsche himself never truly entered.

I. *India for Nietzsche*

Nietzsche did not understand, and really could not have understood, Indian culture outside of an orientalist framework that conditioned all scholarship on India in the nineteenth century.¹ Steeped in European Romanticism, the idea of India available to

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¹ For a review of the literature, an extensive discussion of Nietzsche's reliance on Jacolliot's translation of Manu, and Nietzsche's friendship with the Indologist Paul Deussen, see David Smith, "Nietzsche's Hinduism, Nietzsche's India: Another Look," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 28 (2004): 37–56. For a thorough review of Nietzsche's library of books on Eastern

Nietzsche was a space of European origins, with the ideological power of purity and the historical safety of ancient times. As Edward Said notes straight off in *Orientalism*, “The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurrent images of the Other.” (Said, 1979, 1) The project of Asia, in the Romantic imagination, was one of Europe reclaiming and redeeming these ancient cultures to make them intelligible and relevant to modern times.

As a philologist, Nietzsche was at the core of this project. Nietzsche, though, deemed most philology students as incapable of understanding the depth and import of their material. Said notes that the term philology “...seems to include both a gift for exceptional spiritual insight into the language and the ability to produce work whose articulation is of aesthetic and historical power. ... What Nietzsche also sees is philology as something *born, made* in the Viconian sense as a sign of human enterprise, created as a category of human discovery, self-discovery and originality. Philology is a way of historically setting oneself off, as great artists do, from one’s time and an immediate past even as, paradoxically and antinomically, one actually characterizes one’s modernity by so doing.” (Ibid, 131–32) Seen this way, Nietzsche’s engagement with India was to explore the “aesthetic and historical” project of discovering the India that was Europe’s past and to place Europe in its modern place, as represented by this ability to make these human discoveries.

Said notes that Novalis (and other Romantics) urged Europeans to study India because the spiritual nature of its culture “could defeat the materialism and mechanism (and republicanism) of Occidental culture.” (Ibid, 115) It would bring a new and revitalized Europe. “But what mattered most was not Asia so much as Asia’s *use* to modern Europe. Thus anyone ... who mastered an Oriental language was a spiritual hero, a knight-errant bringing back to Europe a sense of the holy mission it had now lost.” (Ibid, 115) This insight leads to the second strand of the historiography of Nietzsche’s encounter with India. Nietzsche did not care about India per se but was more interested in producing his own critique of Europe and needed an ideological space from which to launch this critique.

In the text entitled *The Laws of Manu*, Nietzsche saw the conscious power discourse he sought in Europe. *Manu* is a work in the ancient Sanskrit tradition composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE that was central to Indian caste philosophy.

Nietzsche praises *Manu* in multiple places. For instance, in *Twilight of the Idols*, he remarks that the civilization that devised *Manu* is “a species of human being a hundred times more gentle and rational” than the Christian world. Further, he decries, “How paltry the “New Testament” is compared with *Manu*, how ill it smells!” (TI

philosophy, see Thomas H Brobjer, “Nietzsche’s Reading About Eastern Philosophy,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 28 (2004): 3–35.

8:3)² In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche again praises Manu, “an incomparably spiritual and superior work, so much as to *name* which in the same breath with the Bible would be a sin against the *spirit* ... noble values everywhere, a feeling of perfection, an affirmation of life, a triumphant feeling of well-being in oneself and of goodwill towards life – the *sun* shines on the entire book.” (Nietzsche, 175) This exultant praise was grounded less in admiration for India than in Nietzsche’s fantasy of India’s caste system and his desire to locate a will to power somewhere in a space that was antithetical to Europe in almost every way.³ The Orientalist scholarly framework of the time provided Nietzsche with the “Other” that he needed.⁴ For all these reasons, it is a fruitless endeavor to read Nietzsche for insights about India itself because his topic and focus was, and was always meant to be, his critique of Europe.⁵

II. Nietzsche for India

Scholarship on the Indian understanding of Nietzsche proves not to be as robust as that for Nietzsche on India. Graham Parkes provides an excellent review of the relationship between Nietzsche and Asian thought. In the introductory remarks to his chapter “The Orientation of the Nietzschean Text,” Parkes is forthright in stating that of the traditions of Asian thought, India served as a source for Nietzsche. However, the only sustained engagement with Nietzschean thought within Asia is in China and Japan in the modern context. (Parkes, 1991, 4) He clarifies this statement in a

² Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1979), 57, <http://archive.org/details/twilightofidolsa00niet>.

³ For a complete examination of Nietzsche’s use of Manu, including the shortcomings of the translation, see Roger Berkowitz, “Friedrich Nietzsche, the Code of Manu, and the Art of Legislation Symposium: Nietzsche and Legal Theory (Part II),” *Cardozo Law Review* 24, no. 3 (2003 2002): 1131–50; Koenraad Elst, “Manu as a Weapon against Egalitarianism: Nietzsche and Hindu Political Philosophy,” in *Nietzsche, Power, and Politics: Rethinking Nietzsche’s Legacy for Political Thought*, ed. Herman Siemens and Vasti Roodt (Berlin/Boston, GERMANY: De Gruyter, Inc., 2008), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ithaca-ebooks/detail.action?docID=429252>. Smith, “Nietzsche’s Hinduism, Nietzsche’s India: Another Look.”

⁴ Ronald Inden describes this exact process of Othering “It is necessary for the Other to be the way he or she is because of his or her environment, racial composition, or (inferior) place on the evolutionary scale. ... It does this by hierarchizing the Others of the world, by placing them in a spatial, biological, or temporal scale of forms, one which always culminates in Homo Euro-Americanus.” Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), 43. For a more specific treatment of Nietzsche’s project of Othering, see Eberhard Scheiffle, “Questioning One’s ‘Own’ from the Perspective of the Foreign,” in *Nietzsche and Asian Thought*, ed. and trans. Graham Parkes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 31–47.

⁵ Brobjer and Smith both remark on this aspect of Nietzsche’s project, with Smith concluding that Nietzsche’s discussion of Hinduism is “remarkable ... [for] its self-referentiality.” p. 52.

footnote, naming the South Asian Islamic writer and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal as the main Indian intellectual figure to seriously engage with Nietzschean thought.⁶

Iqbal completed a doctoral degree in Philosophy in Munich in 1908 and was deeply influenced by Western philosophical thought, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche included. (Lelyveld, 356) A number of studies explore the resonances in thought between Iqbal and Nietzsche. It is clear to note that the two thinkers follow similar lines of inquiry but also offer distinctly different views on the nature of the “Self.”⁷ Iqbal situates his work firmly in an Islamic philosophical space that sees the highest achievement of human beings to be participation in the divine. In contrast, Nietzsche seeks to step away from the primacy of the divine in the individuation of the self.⁸ Iqbal credits the Islamic mystic/poet Rumi as the source of his investigations⁹ Through Rumi, Iqbal claims to have been introduced to Nietzsche.¹⁰ The author submits that Iqbal’s primary focus is on a spiritual examination of Islam. Nietzsche is present to the degree that his thought fits within that spiritual frame.

However, Iqbal is not the only South Asian thinker to have had a sustained engagement with Nietzsche. The author will next examine the select works of A. K. Coomaraswamy, the pioneer historian, philosopher of Indian art, and Indian nationalist thinker. The author argues that Coomaraswamy expands on the ramifications of Nietzsche’s use of the spiritual side of Indian philosophy and combines this with a nationalist political interpretation of Superman to bridge the

⁶ Parkes, 16. Note 1. For a brief biography and bibliography of Iqbal, see David Lelyveld, “Iqbal, Muhammad (C. 1877-1938),” in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, ed. Richard C. Martin (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 356, http://archive.org/details/EncyclopediaOfIslamAndTheMuslimWorld_411.

⁷ For in-depth analyses, see Bilal Ahmad Dar, “Iqbal and Nietzsche’s Concept of Eternal Recurrence,” *Intellectual Discourse* 19, no. 2 (2011): 281–305; Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, “The Influence of Modern Western Philosophers on Iqbāl,” *Religious Inquiries* 7, no. 14 (December 1, 2018): 91–108, <https://doi.org/10.22034/ri.2018.81136>; Roy Jackson, *Muslim, and Supermuslim: The Quest for the Perfect Being and Beyond* (Cham, SWITZERLAND: Springer International Publishing AG, 2020), 161–71, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ithaca-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6040140>; Subhash C Kashyap, *The Unknown Nietzsche: His Socio-Political Thought and Legacy* (Delhi: National [Pub. House], 1970), 191–209.

⁸ Clarifying treatments of this point appear in Haddad-Adel, “The Influence of Modern Western Philosophers on Iqbāl,” 104; Jackson, *Muslim, and Supermuslim*, 162–65.

⁹ “Inspired by the genius of the Master of Rûm, I rehearse the sealed book of secret lore./His soul is the source of the flames, I am but as the spark that gleams for a moment.” Muhammad Iqbal and Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *Secrets of the Self (Asrar-i Khudi): A Philosophical Poem* (London: Macmillan, 1920), 8, <http://archive.org/details/secretsofselfasr00iqbauoft>.

¹⁰ “I said to Rumi, ‘Who is this madman?’/He answered: ‘This is the German genius ...’ Iqbal devotes a small section of his poem Javid-Nama to “The station of the German philosopher Nietzsche” in Muhammad Iqbal, *Javid Nama*, trans. A. J. Arberry (George Allin and Unwin Ltd. Year, 1966), 111–13, <http://archive.org/details/javidnama>.

spiritual and the political and show the relevance of Nietzschean thought in the modern Indian context.

III. A. K. Coomaraswamy: A Brief Introduction

A. K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) was a Tamil Hindu born in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to an aristocratic Tamil father and an Englishwoman from a wealthy Kent family. He had a wide-ranging career, starting as a mineralogist, but quickly shifted his attention to the arts of the Indian subcontinent and the relationship between art, education, and the development of a national character. As Partha Mitter notes, “Coomaraswamy aimed at reviving ‘the true Hindu ideals’ ... [he] endorsed the cultural nationalist view that the *swadeshi* protest was ... a spiritual struggle against an alien ideal. Artists with their deeper sense of political wrongs and their longing for self-realisation were the true nation-builders.”¹¹ Coomaraswamy was a champion of a *swadeshi* approach to Indian art that privileged a pure and ideal India in distinction to a materialist West.¹²

Coomaraswamy’s writings explore the intersection of the political and spiritual as they jointly create the unique synthesis that marks Indian cultural and historical consciousness. In an essay entitled “Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government,” Coomaraswamy directly connects the artist, the priest, and the king. “The application is to the ‘King’, the ‘man of action’ and ‘artist’ in any domain whatever; there is nothing that can be truly and well done or made except by the man in whom the marriage of the Sacerdotium and the Regnum has been consummated, nor can any peace be made except by those who have made their peace with themselves.” (Coomaraswamy, 1942, 37) Here, the nationalist Coomaraswamy explains his view that spiritual power is not sufficient to bring about true political power. There must be a temporal power as well. In so doing, he lays the groundwork for his ideas about the expression of Indian cultural and spiritual power in the past, spurring a form of nationalist power in the present.

The author of this paper next examines in-depth two works by this central figure in Indian thought and history. The first is his “Cosmopolitan View of Nietzsche” from

¹¹ Mitter, 260-1. “Swadeshi” is the word to describe a movement within the Indian nationalist program that encouraged Indians to boycott foreign, especially British, goods and increase domestic production and consumption as a step on the road to independence.

¹² For a complete biography of Coomaraswamy, see Volume 3: His Life and Work in Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, *Coomaraswamy*, ed. Roger Lipsey, Bollingen Series; 89 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977). Molly Aitken briefly discusses Coomaraswamy’s importance to Rajput art history in Molly Emma Aitken, *A Magic World: New Visions of Indian Painting* (Mumbai: Marg Publication, 2016) 10–19. Partha Mitter explores Coomaraswamy’s role in early twentieth-century nationalist art history in Partha Mitter, *Art, and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 234–66.

the volume *Dance of Siva*. Here, Coomaraswamy appropriates the Nietzschean Superman ideal into the pantheon of Indian religious achievers. Then, the author moves to a much less well-known essay, “Rajput Cartoons: A Criticism after Nietzsche,” (sic) which appeared in an early 20th-century magazine called *The Rajput*. This essay positions Rajput painting as an expression of a pure Hindu essence and a will to power that lays the ground for the Indian nation. Taken together, Coomaraswamy’s essays generally locate in India the spiritual power, and particularly in the Rajputs the temporal power, that Nietzsche sought in his ideological antidote to Western (Christian) civilization. Coomaraswamy, however, far from privileging Nietzsche, actually subordinates and Indianizes Nietzsche by showing how Indian actors already existed in that space beyond good and evil that Nietzsche idolized. Further, Coomaraswamy introduces what he sees as India’s supermen, the Rajputs, to the Nietzschean analysis that was rightfully suited to them in Coomaraswamy’s mind.

IV. “Cosmopolitan View of Nietzsche”

Coomaraswamy immediately embraces Nietzsche’s critique of the West, idolizing Nietzsche’s thought as “passionate protest against unworthy values.” (Coomaraswamy, 1918, 115) Here, however, the European values under question are not the Christian morals that so occupied Nietzsche, but rather an intrusive colonialism and industrialization that assaulted traditional Indian society.

In particular, Coomaraswamy emphasizes the accord between the spiritual side of Nietzsche and the spiritual heart of India and further develops the strain of Indian thought that was a crucial influence on Nietzsche. “Of special significance is the beautiful doctrine of the Superman – so like the Chinese concept of the Superior Man, and the Indian *Mahā Purusha*, *Bodhisattva* and *Jivan-mukta*.”¹³ In Superman, Coomaraswamy sees the being that accords with those figures of the Asian world who have reached the highest spiritual achievements possible. Be it Confucian ethical superiority or one of the many varieties of India’s great beings, all of these entities have moved beyond the confines of this world through the attainment of deep knowledge into a realm of freedom.

Indeed, Coomaraswamy comes to define the Nietzschean Superman in entirely Indian terms, saying, “he is the *Arhat* ..., *Buddha* ..., *Jina* ..., *Tīrthakara* ..., the *Bodhisattva* ..., and above all *Jīvan-mukta* ..., whose actions are no longer good or bad, but proceed from his freed nature.” (Coomaraswamy, 116) Coomaraswamy co-

¹³ Coomaraswamy, 115. *Maha Purusha* is a Hindu term that translates literally to “Great Man” and represents the cosmic being apart from the world and is the supreme spirit in the universe. In certain forms of Buddhism, a *bodhisattva* is a person whose essence (*sattva*) is enlightenment (*bodhi*) but who, out of compassion, has stayed in this world to save suffering beings. *Jivanmukta* is a Hindu term meaning “released from life” for someone who has gained complete consciousness and self-knowledge and exists in the world, but in complete freedom and apart from the world.

opts the Nietzschean logic of freedom from “weak” morality directly into the Indian religious world. Each of these Indian figures has theoretically attained some level of learning and insight that moves them to a state of realization, allowing them freedom from attachment to the moral categories of good and evil. Further, Coomaraswamy makes a case for India’s priority in this realm. Not only does India already have these Supermen and has had them for centuries, but they are a vital and regular part of the Indian religious imaginary. Freedom, from moral binaries and from the confines of life itself, is these traditions’ regular discourse and goal. Coomaraswamy’s likening of the Nietzschean Superman to them legitimizes Nietzsche *through* India. For Coomaraswamy, Nietzsche belongs to this tradition – not the other way around¹⁴

The Indian experience shows that Superman, far from being someone to fear, is actually someone to praise and emulate. The positive ethical dimension of Superman becomes clear in Coomaraswamy’s elaboration. “The teaching of Nietzsche is pure *nishkāma dharma*: ... neither egotistic nor altruistic... it is precisely himself the Superman may not spare...The Highest duty is that of self-realization.” (Coomaraswamy, 1918, 118-19) *ishkāma* dharma is the duty to act from selflessness, without expectation for personal reward. For Coomaraswamy, Superman does not act for himself, which would be a delusion. Superman leads the way on the path of self-awareness and the awareness of the true nature of life. The “will to power” at the heart of Superman’s program is the desire to reach this point. As such, Superman is neither a threat nor a danger. “The ‘Will to Power’ has nothing to do with tyranny – it is opposed alike to the tyranny of the autocrat and the tyranny of the majority. The Will to Power asserts that our life is not to be swayed by motives of pleasure or pain, the ‘pairs of opposites,’ but is to be directed towards its goal, and that goal is the freedom and spontaneity of the *Jīvan-mukta*. And this is beyond good and evil. This is also set out in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*: the hero must be superior to pity (*aśocyānanvaśocasivam*); resolute for the fray, but unattached to the result...” (Coomaraswamy, 1918, 118) Coomaraswamy sees this as the “interpenetration of the spiritual and material” (Coomaraswamy, 1918, 115). Spiritual freedom comes from being in the place beyond good and evil, and temporal freedom comes from acting out of that place. No longer bound by the “pairs of opposites” that entrap thought and action, the logical outcome of the will to power is exactly the freedom to be detached and have no concern for the vicissitudes of life. Therefore, this will to power is not a source of tyranny but the antithesis of tyranny. For Coomaraswamy, Superman is the anti-tyrant, free even from the desire to hold power, and concerned only with acting from the freedom they have gained.

That action, as well, must necessarily take the nature of existence into account as its very ground. It matters not, Coomaraswamy points out, whether we look at

¹⁴ Insightful analysts of Nietzsche also remark that his interest in Vedanta might have helped steer his thinking to these non-dualist precincts of Indian philosophy. See, in particular, Thomas H Brobjer, “Nietzsche’s Reading About Eastern Philosophy,” 13–15; Smith, “Nietzsche’s Hinduism, Nietzsche’s India: Another Look,” 49.

Superman's mystic intuition as "in close accord with the Brahmanical formula, 'That art thou,'" (Coomaraswamy, 1918, 116) or as the selfless expression of the Buddhists. Referring to the Indian Buddhist poet and philosopher Aśvasghoṣa (c. 80 – c. 150 CE), Coomaraswamy asserts that "it is said that we attain to Nirvāṇa and that various *spontaneous* displays of activity are accomplished." The Bodhisattvas do not consider the ethics of their behavior, "they have attained to spontaneity of action, because their discipline is in unison with the wisdom and activity of all Tathāgatas."¹⁵ These enlightened beings need no systems of morality to act morally, as their action springs spontaneously from a space of total freedom. Freedom from attachment to the world, from the bonds of conventionally conceived good and evil, is the wellspring of truly moral action.

Coomaraswamy places the definition of Superman in the essence of monism. Coomaraswamy's monist, Hindu-inflected worldview turns Nietzschean self-realization into perfect service to all. The seeming self-centeredness at the heart of the will to power is actually a spontaneous accord with the nature of the universe. "Thus we shall never comprehend the selfishness which Nietzsche and other mystics praise, if we interpret it according to the lights of those who believe that all action should be *praiseworthy*. The pattern of man's behavior is not to be found in any code, but in the principles of the universe, which is continually revealing to us *its own nature*." (Coomaraswamy, 1918, 120) Coomaraswamy, therefore, argues that Nietzsche's great lesson is as simple as the most basic relationship in life, "That your very self be in your action, as the mother is in the child: let that be your formula of virtue."¹⁶ The lesson of the Superman resounds in the message of Chuang Tzu's man of perfect virtue, in Jesus and in Socrates. (Ibid, 119-20)

So far then, from a doctrine of self-indulgence, it is a form of asceticism or ardor (*tapas*) which Nietzsche would have us impose on ourselves, if we are strong enough. This was precisely the view of Manu when he established a severe rule of life for the Brahman, and one far easier for the Śūdra. And understanding this, Nietzsche has praised the institution of caste, for he thought it right that life should grow colder towards the summit. As the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* pronounces, a Brahman should do nothing for the sake of enjoyment...Those who have comprehended the decline and fall of Western civilization will recognize in Nietzsche the reawakening of the conscience of Europe. (Ibid, 121)

Coomaraswamy argues that Nietzsche has brought Europe back to the spiritual center it had lost and back to the discipline center that will make it spiritually alive. Coomaraswamy's Nietzsche has provided for Europe the terms of its spiritual

¹⁵ Coomaraswamy, 120. Tathāgata is the Sanskrit term used by the Buddha for "one who has thus gone," and refers to those who exist in a space beyond attachments to the transitory world.

¹⁶ Coomaraswamy, 119. It is a quote from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "Section 27: The Virtuous."

rejuvenation by reconnecting it with the strong discipline of the source – by reconnecting it with India and what India already possessed.

In the end, Coomaraswamy provides a context for the Nietzschean Superman in a broad and inclusive spectrum of Indian thought. The reanimation of European civilization will come from the connection to an ancient pan-Indian discourse of freedom. However, how India will save Europe's soul is not Coomaraswamy's main concern. Coomaraswamy's nationalist program is his central interest, and thus a material ground of power needs to be established in India. The West believes that India is the empire of the spirit, but India's spiritual Supermen are religious heroes of long ago. Coomaraswamy now needs to locate in India the Supermen of the present, whose very being embraces and emits power, and in whose presence Coomaraswamy can locate a source of freedom in India's current moment action as well. These men are the Rajputs.

V. "Rajput Cartoons: A Criticism after Nietzsche"¹⁷

This essay appeared in a London-based journal entitled *The Rajput*, which was published from 1911-3. The title of the journal refers to a royal caste (Rajput literally means "Putra," son of a "raja" king) who held positions of power in many princely states under indirect rule within the British empire. The journal is deeply pro-royalty, both in India and in England. Throughout its volumes, many articles celebrate the valorous history of the Rajputs, and there are special numbers devoted to King George V's 1911 coronation and *darbar* ceremonies, complete with articles drawing connections between ideas of Hindu kingship and the British monarchy.

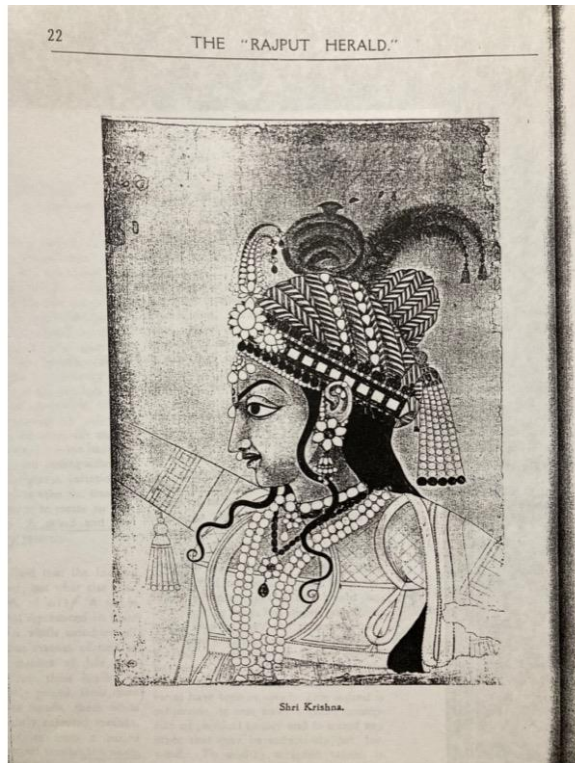
In this article, Coomaraswamy introduces and immediately establishes as a base of his argument that Rajput painting, a classic form of Indian art,¹⁸ is one of the highest arts of India, "...more important than any other Indian painting, with the sole exception of those great and noble works at Ajanta, which rank with the greatest in the world."¹⁹ Indeed, for Coomaraswamy, Rajput paintings are "[o]f all the

¹⁷ A typographical error, Nietzsche is misspelled as "Nietzsche," appears in the title only of the original version of the paper. The author is using the correct spelling here. Ananda K Coomaraswamy, "Rajput Cartoons: A Criticism After Nietzsche," ed. Thakur Jessrajsinghji Seesodia, *The Rajput (The Rajput Herald) A Monthly Illustrated Magazine Devoted to Rajput History, Antiquities, Literature & Art* 2, no. 6 (June 1912): 21–25.

¹⁸ A seminal work in the field of Rajput art history is Ananda K Coomaraswamy *Rajput painting*; (London; New York: H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1916). Partha Mitter provides more modern analyses of Rajput painting and the influence of Coomaraswamy in Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922*; Partha Mitter, *Indian Art*, 2001; Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2013). A recent volume marking the 100th anniversary of Coomaraswamy's original text and assessing the field's current state appears in Aitken, *A Magic World*.

¹⁹ Coomaraswamy. 1912. "Rajput Cartoons: A Criticism After Nietzsche," 21. The Buddhist cave painting at Ajanta in western India is among the finest extant examples of ancient Indian

vernacular styles of Indian painting, however, the most purely and nobly Indian.” (Coomaraswamy, 1912, 21) Coomaraswamy is searching for signs of aristocratic political power and searching for an Ur-style of Indian painting. In a pair of line drawings, he argues that he has found them both.



(Figure 1: Krishna from Coomaraswamy, “Rajput Cartoons”)

The materials that are the subject of his article, which he found in a bazaar, are two line drawings that replicate murals in the royal palace of the Rajput state of Jaipur, in current-day Rajasthan, India. The paintings depict the god Krishna (Figure 1) and the goddess Radha, who is Krishna’s chief consort, dancing together with a chorus of musicians at hand. To Coomaraswamy, these works “...afford ample evidence of the purely national and Hindu character of Rajput painting up to almost modern times.” (Coomaraswamy, 1912, 21) The paintings are so “deliberate” and “self-confident” and “full of wonder at the beauty of the world” that they could not be the product of individual inspiration, but rather are “the product of a whole civilization, of inviolable

art.

aristocratic traditions, protected by religious sanctions.” (Ibid, 21) These paintings bridge the spiritual and the material, the sacred and the secular, the political and the religious. It is a “proud and passionate art.” (Ibid, 23)

These drawings and the paintings that they reflect, according to Coomaraswamy, address “a whole catechism of questions” regarding Rajput identity. From them, Coomaraswamy believes he can reconstruct the whole pattern of Rajput culture, “aristocratic, simple, splendid, generous and self-sufficient.” (Ibid, 23) The drawings establish and are agents of the preservation and possible redemption of Indian history. They are the only evidence one needs to “establish the magnificence of that ancient Hindu life that is vanishing before our eyes to-day in a tornado of education and reform.” (Ibid, 23) For Coomaraswamy, the shift away from traditional ways of life and forms of knowledge that accompanied the rise of European educational models and political ideals was tantamount to a natural disaster for Hindu culture.

Coomaraswamy, therefore, elevates these traditional examples of Indian art to the status of “Hindu life” itself, and this life is under a kind of seismic attack from the influence of modern, Western thought. Further, it is not just the threatened traditional forms of life but something much more central and powerful. Coomaraswamy notes: “I cannot refrain from interpreting this art in Nietzschean terms. It is ruler-art, embodying the accepted values of a highly disciplined and cultured race, the fruit of the accumulated labor of generations. It is the product of long and conscious choice and self-restraint. It is the visible record of what a great Hindu tradition, effectively voicing the sentiment of a dominant Hindu race, and in many respects of all Hinduism.” (Ibid, 23) This Rajput art projects the power of the kingly strata of society, encapsulates the deeply held virtues of a dominant Hindu caste, and also of the “dominant Hindu race.” Nietzsche valued most his idea of India’s conscious discourse of social mastery at the root of the caste system. Coomaraswamy has adopted this idea and extended it in his celebration of the power, then and always, in this Rajput art.

Coomaraswamy’s political program is obvious, and he does not attempt to conceal it. Modern Hindus have given over their aesthetic sensibility and, in Coomaraswamy’s mind, their basic identity to “...something much less severe, something nearer to what they themselves, or rather, perhaps, nearer to what some English academician or Indian copyist has seen. What a confession is this! To admit that the strivings of so many centuries have been in vain! This indeed is subjection, to cast away a racial conception of physical beauty and to accept any other that may be put forward.” (Ibid, 23) Modern Hindus, as Coomaraswamy asserts in this reference to Nietzschean terms, have accepted a “less severe” or weaker morality of European imitation that has removed the firm basis of their identity. India has become, “aesthetically a province of modern Europe” (Ibid, 23) For Coomaraswamy, a truly national art, any truly expressed vision of the national character, needs a deep connection to its own history. To break that connection, to turn to an outsider’s identity, makes art that is “no longer national but only personal, and there is no long obedience in any one direction – this indeed is to move from order to chaos.” (Ibid, 24)

Rajput painting has the history of its people in it, and provides the basis of the nation – the articulated statement of the power of Hindu culture. For Coomaraswamy, these small paintings bear enormous weight. They are the ground of the Hindu nation and the justification for the strong, fully legitimate argument for Hindu national freedom.

Coomaraswamy looks forward to a day when the “new ruler-artists (*rishis*)”²⁰ command respect in India. This requires two things. First, “the preparation of correspondingly severe discipline, until, out of the present conflict of ideals a national ideal is recreated.” (Coomaraswamy, 1912, 24) An Indian national space needs to be remade out of the struggle with the British. However, this nation cannot simply be a nation on or in British terms. The keyword here is “recreated.” For Coomaraswamy, the basis for a strong nation exists already within India. Therefore, the goal is to uncover the sources of national identity in India’s past, not to impose a new set of ideas outside the subcontinent.

Second, Indian political attention must then focus on that Indian nation. “[O]ur allegiance may not be given to any, however powerful, unless in them are reincarnated the spirit and the features of and an older India, for ‘all excellence is inheritance,’ and ‘progress is the strengthening of the type ... everything else is a misunderstanding and a danger.’”²¹ In quoting *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Will to Power*, Coomaraswamy again hearkens to his understanding of the interpenetration of the spiritual and the physical. Outer strength comes from the cleavage to the inner, essential spirit, progressively being remade and distilled further and further into a pure ideal. In Coomaraswamy’s interpretation of Nietzsche, this inner, essential power willing itself into existence is the emergence of the Rajput character in the highly refined practice of Rajput painting. The distillation and expression of power in this princely caste is the ground of the Hindu nation, the excellence, and the inheritance of the Hindu, which will replace the British outsider.

Coomaraswamy then turns to one of India’s other great painting traditions, the Mughals. These artists, according to Coomaraswamy, were servants and courtiers, flattering the emperors and moving towards a rhetoric of “resemblance” in portraiture. While this puts them in close contact with the “picturesque and seductive” personal art of the Europeans, it moves them away from a truly powerful art because their goal is the object, not the articulation of identity itself. (Coomaraswamy, 1912, 24) Mughal art, as well, is outsider art as far as Coomaraswamy is concerned, more like a

²⁰ “Rishi” is a Sanskrit term for a sage or seer or a person who possesses knowledge. Coomaraswamy here posits the learned man as an accomplished spiritual seeker and recipient of worldly legitimacy as well. It furthers his argument about the temporal and spiritual interpenetration in his ideal ruling class.

²¹ Coomaraswamy, 24. “All excellence is inheritance” is from TI 10:47, Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ*, 101. . “Progress is the strengthening of the type ...” is from WP 1023, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 529–30, <http://archive.org/details/FriedrichNietzscheTheWillToPower>.

European than an Indian tradition. Moreover, just like European political ideas are an external imposition on the truth of Hindu identity, so too Mughal art cannot express an authentic Hindu or Indian identity. For Coomaraswamy, “Mughal art is essentially reactive, and scarcely ever touches the deep springs of life.” (Ibid, 25)

Rajput art, though, “belongs to the creative art of the world.” (Ibid, 24) Rajput painters put in their works “a racial tradition and a local character.” (Ibid, 25) Their success is measured in how much we can recognize in life “those forms of head and eyes and mouth, those characteristic movements, those dispositions of drapery, that power and repose with which they make us acquainted.” Rajput art, therefore, expresses something deeper and more timeless than the political, imitative, and object-focused art of the Mughals or Europeans. It is imbued with a spirit. Coomaraswamy urges his readers “to see with their transfiguring eyes,” they who “like the rishis who heard and reported the Epics and Puranas for our enlightenment, saw things fuller, simpler, stronger than they seem to us.” (Ibid, 25) It is a call for Hindus to look to their past, the spiritual depth of their history, and seek in the modern inheritors of this history – the Rajputs – the rebirth of the pure spirit resident in these origins.

Coomaraswamy’s culminating call completes his appropriation of Nietzsche. Spiritually and temporally, Nietzsche’s Supermen actually and already reside in an India that awaits their redemptive powers. Coomaraswamy’s essays are the statement of Romantic orientalism that appropriates Indian spirituality as moral superiority and Rajput heroism as the ground for nationalist freedom. Behind it, all, however, stands a Nietzsche that India needed, much like Nietzsche needed them, as the foundation for their shared antithesis to the “West.” Moreover, Coomaraswamy’s Nietzsche embodies ideas that had their highest expression in the spiritual depth of the Hindu religio-philosophical world. For Coomaraswamy, Nietzsche, like the Rajputs, becomes the modern expression of timeless Indian truth.

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