

# “A Generation of Spiritual Bastards and Intellectual Pariahs”

## A Study of Ananda Coomaraswamy's Attitudes to Colonial English Education in India and Sri Lanka<sup>1</sup>

“English influence and education have robbed us of much that we had, so that we no longer know or trust ourselves and are like to become a generation of spiritual bastards, discontented with our own and no longer possessed of any treasure that could be offered to our guests.”<sup>2</sup> The above sentence comprehends, in essence, a distillation of Ananda Coomaraswamy's opinions and attitudes towards the colonial type of English education prevalent during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in India and Sri Lanka. The purpose of the present paper is to examine in some detail Coomaraswamy's frequent re-iterations of this attitude of protest and disparagement towards a system of education that was considered on the one hand by the majority of his contemporaries as the ‘Ultima Thule’ of all their endeavours and an unfailing passport to wealth and happiness, and (by a small minority) as “a most pernicious system” (James Alwis). Coomaraswamy himself, significantly, formed one of the minority, and was perhaps the most eloquent and influential of them all in his generation.

The system of colonial English education in Sri Lanka (and in India), with its heavy bias towards the Christian religion, and English language, literature, and traditions, though relentlessly pursued by the majority of the Sinhalese and the Tamils was, from its inception<sup>3</sup> subjected to severe criticism especially by the Sinhalese intelligentsia. The first voices of protest against this ill-suited and lop-sided system of education which gave no place to the indigenous languages, arts and crafts, religions, customs, traditions and cultures of the Sinhalese and the Tamils were, strangely enough, raised by Englishmen themselves: George Turnour (in his introduction to the translation of the *Mahavansa*, 1837)<sup>4</sup> was the initiator of a tradition of radical protest which continued well into the middle of the 20th century. This century-long tradition of radical protest against colonial “English” education may be traced clearly in the writings, *inter alia*, of Turnour, Rev. D. J. Gogerly, James Alwis, Ananda Coomaraswamy, the

1. I am indebted to the following colleagues at the Peradeniya Campus of the University of Sri Lanka for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper: Dr. R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, Associate Professor of History, Mr. W. J. F. Labrooy, Associate Professor of History, Mr. Ian Goonetilleke, Librarian.
2. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Religious Basis of the Forms of Indian Society*, New York, 1946, p. 32.
3. The beginnings of this system of education with its heavy weightage towards the English language as the medium of instruction in schools may be traced to the Colebrooke-Cameron recommendations of 1832-33 (in Sri Lanka) and to Macaulay's “Minute on Education” of 1835 (in India). For details regarding the educational structure in Sri Lanka see section 1 of the present writer's paper, “English Education in Colonial Sri Lanka and the Estranged Intellectual: The Case of James Alwis (1823-78)”, to appear in *Modern Ceylon Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2.
4. George Turnour, *The Mahavansa in Roman Characters, with the Translation Subjoined; and an Introductory Essay on Pali Buddhistical Literature*, in 2 volumes, Vol. I containing the First Thirty Eight Chapters, Colombo, 1837.

Ponnambalam brothers (Arunachalam and Ramanathan),<sup>5</sup> Anagarika Dharmapala, Arumuga Navalar, Kumaratunga Munidasa, and a host of other lesser known Sinhalese and Tamil intellectuals and literary men.

In India, as in Sri Lanka, Europeans themselves had initiated a frontal attack on colonial education quite early; as Coomaraswamy himself reported, Sir George Birdwood had said:

Our (i.e., English) education has destroyed their (i.e., the Indians') love of their own literature...and worst of all, their repose in their own traditional and national religion. It has disgusted them with their own homes, their sisters, their very wives. It has brought discontent into every family so far as its baneful influences have reached.<sup>6</sup>

Birdwood had continued that the "sinister shadow" of the British system of colonial education involved a "slow poisoning of the spiritual life."<sup>7</sup> Yet another forthright critic of the colonial educational system in India was the Marquis of Zetland, who "deplored the fact that it is only in externals that British rule (had) affected India, while it had added nothing to her cultural legacy."<sup>8</sup> Even such eminent products of British colonial education as Jawaharlal Nehru had made the "pathetic confession" that (as a result of their English education) "I have become a queer mixture of East and West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere," words which Coomaraswamy identified as being "the marks of a terrible soul-sickness."<sup>9</sup> The Indians, as Dinesh Sen declared, "became willing disciples of the new teachers...thoroughly anglicised in spirit," and learned to despise (our) (i.e., the Indians') own country at the same time that we called ourselves nationalists."<sup>10</sup>

Ananda Coomaraswamy's attitudes towards English education in Sri Lanka and his strictures against it applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to English education in India as well (and presumably to all other similar British crown colonies at the time); the system, as well as its ill-effects, were similar in the two countries, for, as Coomaraswamy was careful to point out, the baneful influences of English education in Sri Lanka were "true of all or almost all English education in India;"<sup>11</sup> in both countries,

Western educationalists by ignoring Eastern culture and endeavouring to impose Western civilisation in its entirety upon a great variety of people to whose hearts and minds it makes no appeal, are sapping the very foundations of these peoples' individuality and independence of thought. The consequent separation from all local emotion has an extraordinary effect in sterilizing the minds of the Ceylon or Indian youth.<sup>12</sup>

5. Ponnambalam Arunachalam and Ponnambalam Ramanathan were cousins of Ananda Coomaraswamy.

6. Sir George Birdwood, *Industrial Arts of India*, 1880, quoted by Coomaraswamy in *The Religious Basis of the Forms of Indian Society*, p. 31.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ceylon National Review*, No. 2, July 1906, p. 184.

12. *Ibid.*

In the present article it is proposed to place one of the key figures of the Sri Lankan (and Indian) nationalistic movement in his due place in the native tradition of radical protest in respect to colonial education, and to attempt a coherent formulation of the main features of the "National" system of education for Sri Lanka that Coomaraswamy apparently contemplated in his essays and lectures around the beginning of the 20th century.

Coomaraswamy's ideas and ideals about education in Sri Lanka, however, can most profitably be examined in the wider context of his cultural interests and his contrasting attitudes towards the "Two Cultures", i.e., the traditional Eastern (especially Indian and Sri Lankan) civilisation and culture, and the modern industrialised Western civilisation and culture. Coomaraswamy himself perhaps best symbolised the synthesis or interpenetration of the East and the West,<sup>13</sup> being born of mixed parentage, with a Tamil as his father<sup>14</sup> and an English woman as his mother.<sup>15</sup> Ananda was born in Colombo on 22nd August, 1877. On the death of his father within two years of his birth, however, the young Coomaraswamy was taken by his mother to England where he was brought up and received his schooling just like any other native English schoolboy.<sup>16</sup> As Coomaraswamy himself declared later on, "I have been through the western world more thoroughly than any but a few Tamils and have been brought up entirely as an English man."<sup>17</sup> He was educated at Wycliffe College, and later at the University of London where he received a doctorate in Geology in 1906. Coomaraswamy arrived in Sri Lanka in 1903,

13. Cf. "He bridged the East and the West as few men have wanted to and fewer yet have done." Dona Louisa Coomaraswamy, Introduction to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon*, (1913), New York, Noon Day Press edition, 1964, p.v.

14. Ananda Coomaraswamy's father was Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy, described as "the most distinguished Ceylonese of his time." (James Crouch, "Ananda Coomaraswamy in Ceylon: A Bibliography," *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, July-Dec. 1973, p. 54). Sir Mutu was "the first Hindu to be called to the bar in London, and author of the first translation into English of a Pali Buddhist text" (Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Am I My Brother's Keeper?* Introduction by Robert Allerton Parker, New York, 1943, p. viii); he was also a member of the Legislative Council of Ceylon, and its unofficial leader, a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society, London, and a member of the Asiatic Society, Paris. An Oriental scholar in his own right, Sir Mutu published the *Dathavansa; or the History of the Tooth Relic of Gotama Buddha, the Pali Text, and its Translation into English, with Notes*, in 1874; his works also included *Arichandra or the Martyr of Truth: A Drama, Translated from the Tamil, and Dedicated to the Queen*. Two other works entitled *Sutta Nipata, or, the Sermons and Discourses of Gotama Buddha, a Translation from the Pali*, and *Thayunianavar, or, Hindu Philosophic Poems of the Vedantic-Siddhantic School, A Translation from the Tamil*, probably remained unpublished.

John Scott, writing in 1859, describes a meeting he had with Sir Mutu as follows: "I had a long conversation with Coomaraswamy a wealthy Hindoo and an Advocate of our Supreme Court. He has a thorough knowledge of English and is well-versed in the arguments on Christian Evidences of Paley and Chalmers, but while he professed faith in the One God and rejected the idolatries of his countrymen, he maintained most strongly that the pure morality and subtle philosophy taught in his sacred books was all that human nature needed." John Scott to Elijah Hoole, n.d. received 19th April, 1859, MMS/VIII/1858-1863, quoted in Y. Gooneratne, *English Literature in Ceylon 1815-1878*, Tisara Prakasakayo, Dehiwala, Ceylon, 1968, p. 38.

15. Coomaraswamy's mother was an Englishwoman from Kent, Elizabeth Clay Beeby.

16. Crouch, *loc. cit.*, p. 54.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 65. (Emphasis added).

having been recommended by Wyndham R. Dunstan, Director of the Imperial Institute, to lead the first mineralogical survey of Sri Lanka<sup>18</sup>.

From March 1903 to December 1906 Coomaraswamy resided in Sri Lanka, functioning as the Director of the Mineralogical Survey of Sri Lanka. This short period of less than four years, however, wrought a significant spiritual transformation on the young Coomaraswamy who during this "spiritual homecoming" began to realise the value of the rich cultural heritage of the East in general and of the Sinhalese and the Tamils in particular. Not only did Coomaraswamy experience a deeply significant spiritual regeneration at this time; he also traced to its roots the causes of the decline of Eastern civilisation and culture, and advocated a revivification of the languages, religions, arts and crafts, educational systems, habits and customs, of the Sri Lankans and the Indians. In fact, he advocated a complete reformation of the then highly-anglicised Sri Lankan society; working to this great end, Coomaraswamy founded the Ceylon Social Reform Society in 1906, and was its President until 1911 when he left the Island. It was through the organ of the society, *The Ceylon National Review*, that Coomaraswamy's views were propagated in Sri Lanka and abroad. In 1910-11 Coomaraswamy was placed in charge of the art section of the great United Provinces Exhibition in Allahabad, India. Six years later, when the Dennison W. Ross collection was donated to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, he was appointed the museum's fellow for research in Indian, Persian, and Muslim art,<sup>19</sup> a post that he held until his death in September 1947 at Needham, Massachusetts.

It has to be emphasised here that Coomaraswamy was not merely (nor even primarily) an educational reformer; that his attitude towards contemporary colonial English education was only a natural offshoot of a much wider movement for social and cultural reform; and that his powerful indictment of contemporary English education in Sri Lanka and in India was *ipso facto* predetermined by his attitudes to Eastern and Western civilisation and culture. The present article, however, attempts to deal in some detail primarily with Coomaraswamy's attitudes towards colonial education in India and Sri Lanka; his attitudes towards industrialisation, modernisation, westernisation, and the decline of the Oriental languages, religions, arts and crafts as a result of Western influence are touched upon here only to the extent that they have a bearing on Coomaraswamy's attitude to contemporary education. Coomaraswamy's

18. Coomaraswamy paid several visits to Sri Lanka, beginning perhaps as early as 1896. On 7 March 1903 Coomaraswamy reached Colombo to begin his longest uninterrupted stay in the Island, the visit lasting until December 1906. For details, see Crouch, *loc. cit.*, pp. 54-55.

19. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica in 30 vols., Micropaedia*, vol. III, 15th edition, 1975, p. 126.

extensive writings on Oriental art, aesthetics, literature, religion and philosophy still await the serious attention of scholars.<sup>20</sup>

The system of colonial English education against which not only Coomaraswamy but also his earlier and later contemporaries like James Alwis and the Ponnambalam brothers rose in revolt has been described in adequate detail elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> It was a system the baneful consequences of which had been indicated in the 1860s by James Alwis when contemporary education was described in the categorical phrase, "a most pernicious system of education now carried on among my countrymen."<sup>22</sup>

Coomaraswamy takes up the attack that James Alwis had launched in the 1860s and 70s, nearly three decades later. Even at the turn of the century, despite the vehement protests of Turnour, Gogerly and James Alwis (and several others, less well known),<sup>23</sup> no significant steps had been taken by the colonial authorities in Sri Lanka to change, or even to reform, the system of education then prevalent. If at all, the system had entrenched itself deeper than before within the Sri Lankan socio-cultural environment, and the number of English and Anglo-Vernacular schools and the number of pupils attending them had increased phenomenally, between 1860 and 1900.<sup>24</sup> True, since 1860 and especially after Colonel Olcott's arrival in the Island in 1880, a Buddhist-Sinhalese nationalistic resurgence had begun in the Island; but the strong wave of westernisation in language, culture, habits, dress, and manners had not been thereby stemmed to any very significant extent. On the contrary, at the turn of the century, anglicisation appears to have reached its zenith, as witnessed particularly by the creative work of writers like Albert de Silva, John de Silva, Simon

20. James Crouch estimates that "by 1947, the year of his death, Coomaraswamy's prodigious energy had piled up a vast corpus of writing exceeding some 1000 items running the full gamut from scientific disquisition on rocks to the exegesis of scriptural enigma." (*loc. cit.*, p. 56). For a bibliography of Coomaraswamy's writings, see Helen E. Ladd and Richard Ettinghausen, "The Writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy, A Bibliography," *Ars Islamica* (Ann Arbor, Michigan), vol. ix, 1942, pp. 125-142. A work yet unpublished, and so far inaccessible to me, promises to be the most detailed and comprehensive study so far attempted on Coomaraswamy and his work: Roger William Lipsey, *Signature and Significance: A Study of the life and writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, Ph.D. thesis, New York University, 1974, 880 pp. I am indebted to Mr. H. A. I. Goonetilleke, Librarian, University of Sri Lanka, Peradeniya Campus for this reference. For a concise account of Coomaraswamy and his writings, see also H. A. I. Goonetilleke, *Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy 1877-1947*, Ananda Coomaraswamy Day Souvenir, 9 September 1975, Peradeniya, University of Sri Lanka, Arts Council, 1975 (mimeographed).
21. For a detailed account of the system of English education in colonial Sri Lanka, see the present writer's article referred to in fn. 3 above, and also the following: Y. Gooneratne *op. cit.*, pp. 5-39; R. Ruberu, *Education in Colonial Ceylon*, Kandy Printers, Kandy, Ceylon, 1962; S. A. Pakeman, *Ceylon*, Ernest Benn Ltd., London, 1964, pp. 99-106; *University of Ceylon; History of Ceylon*, vol. III, Ed. K. M. de Silva, Colombo, 1973, Ch. 4; *Education in Ceylon. A Centenary Volume*, Part II, Government Press, Ceylon, 1969, Chs. 31-40; and H. A. Wyndham, *Native Education*, London, 1933, pp. 33-66.
22. James Alwis, *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, Ed. A. C. Seneviratne, Colombo, 1939, p. 16.
23. For more details of the protests of Turnour, Gogerly, etc., and especially of James Alwis against contemporary education, see the paper referred to in fn. 3 above.
24. Between 1880 and 1900, the total number of students in government and state-aided schools doubled, from 10,300 to 20,300. L. J. Gratiën, *English Schools in Ceylon 1870-1900*, Colombo, 1933, p. 22, fn. 32. Cf. also: "The growth of English schools has been too rapid, and the supply of qualified teachers has not kept pace with it." A. Wright, (Ed.), *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*, London, 1907, p. 222.

de Silva, Piyadasa Sirišena and M. C. F. Perera in Sinhalese, in which the anglicised Sinhalese middle classes are vehemently criticised and satirised. English education and fluency in the English language were central to westernisation or anglicisation of the Sri Lankans and the Indians alike.

Coomaraswamy saw more clearly than perhaps any other Sri Lanka of his generation the deleterious effects of the indiscriminate imitation of everything that was "Western" or "English". Himself perhaps the greatest product of the synthesis of the East with the West, Coomaraswamy's love for the indigenous languages and cultures was never coloured by chauvinism; indeed, his education and university training in the West, coupled with his mixed parentage and cultural background and wide reading about and knowledge of Oriental culture and fine arts gave him a unique catholicity of culture during his age. Coomaraswamy was thus very fortunately placed, being capable of appreciating what was best in Occidental civilisation and culture while at the same time understanding remarkably clearly the harmful impact and the probable future consequences of Western "cultural imperialism" on the culture, languages, literature, religions, and especially the arts and crafts, of the Eastern peoples, especially in India and Sri Lanka. One of Coomaraswamy's constant themes was the contention that, on the balance, the Indians and the Sri Lankans had been culturally and spiritually impoverished, rather than enriched, by Western conquest and suzerainty: at a lecture delivered in 1908, for example, he said: "The amount of Western knowledge they, as Ceylonese, had acquired was to be counterbalanced by the amount of Eastern knowledge which they had lost, and he questioned whether they were not in danger of losing more than they gained."<sup>25</sup> With remarkable insight and clarity, Coomaraswamy perceived that the Sri Lankans and the Indians, in their attempts at modernisation, had only acquired the "veneer" of Western civilisation, the superficial external trappings of Western culture; as Coomaraswamy put it with characteristic self-irony:

We lived in caricatured English villas, and studied the latest fashion in collars and ties and sat in the verandahs of collectors' bungalows and strove to preserve our respectability by listening to gramophone records of the London music halls instead of living Indian singers—we learned to sit on chairs and eat with spoons and to adorn our walls with German oleographs and our floors with Brussels carpets...<sup>26</sup>

It is this type of superficial, indiscriminate aping of the west that aroused Coomaraswamy's ire and indignation. Despite all their learning, the Indians had only learned to become (in the words of Coomaraswamy in *Art and Swa-*

25. *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 8, February-June, 1909, p. 69.

26. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, Madras, n.d., pp. 14-15. According to Coomaraswamy, Western influence brought with it the vulgarisation of Indian and Sri Lankan culture and ways of living; cf. *ibid.*, p. 20: "Living in pseudo-European homes naturally and logically involves and corresponds to the using of European furniture, clothes, and finally, to an entire dependence on imported apparatus of material comfort and amusement—a dependence upon boxes of sardines and upon gramophones and on all that lies between them"; Cf. also, *ibid.*, p. 5: "Look around about you at the vulgarisation of modern India—our prostitution of art to the tourist trade—our use of kerosene tins for water jugs, and galvanised zinc for tiles—our caricature of European dress—our homes furnished and ornamented in the style proverbial of seaside lodging houses, with cut-glass chandeliers and china dogs and artificial flowers—our devotion to the harmonium and to the gramophone—these things are the outward and damning proof of "some mighty evils in our souls."

*deshi*) “intellectual parasites”,<sup>27</sup> and India and Sri Lanka had become “a mere suburb of Birmingham and Paris.”<sup>28</sup>

To Coomaraswamy, the imitation and the intellectual parasitism, the soul-sickness, the spiritual impoverishment, the vulgarisation of the arts and crafts and ways of living, were all attributable in the final analysis to the absence of a “National” system of education, and the only remedy available at the time was a radical re-organisation of the colonial system of English education, the evolution, the reconstruction, of a truly “national” system of education, which would be the pivot upon which all other socio-cultural reforms would turn: “It is imperative that we should recognise our real position, if we could reconstruct our national life. To this end, years of patient labour in the field of national education is needed.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, whatever field he explored in his social reform activities or in his scholarly writings on aesthetics, Oriental arts and crafts, industry, language and literature, Coomaraswamy returned again and again to this most important nerve-centre of national progress and cultural development—its system of education, which, above anything, had to be “national”, “indigenous,” in the true sense of the word (not alien, as it was in India and Sri Lanka during the late 19th and early 20th centuries).

Education, to be truly national, had necessarily to be based upon the respective nation’s indigenous languages, indigenous religions, customs, manners, and above all the country’s traditional arts, crafts, and literature. To Coomaraswamy, a nation’s system of education was a more important factor in national prosperity and advancement than even its system of government:

It is a marvel to me how any self-respecting people can endure for a day, not a system of government—but the system of education from which we suffer, a system which is a far deeper and more perpetual insult to our culture than any of the incidents in railway trains of which we hear so much.<sup>30</sup>

What were the deleterious effects of the system of English education that was in force from the mid-19th till the mid-20th centuries in India and Sri Lanka? Here, Coomaraswamy with remarkable intensity of feeling and power of persuasion and conviction enlarged upon the theme that had been worked upon earlier by James Alwis and several other Indian and Sri Lankan intellectuals and *litterateurs*. The neglect (and often even the deliberate destruction) of indigenous culture that accompanied “English” education, emphasises Coomaraswamy, produced, in brief, “a generation of spiritual bastards” discontented both with their own as well as Western culture; it led, in Sir George Birdwood’s words, to “the slow poisoning of the spiritual life,” to “intellectual poverty alike in India and Ceylon”;<sup>31</sup> the educated classes had become “sadly degenerate and de-nationalised.”<sup>32</sup> The ultimate result of English education was “estrangement from the traditional inheritance of India and Ceylon, and too often

27. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, p. 15.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 180

32. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, 1908 (second edition, New York 1956), p. 13.

with consequent lack of sympathy and even scorn for their fellow countrymen, who have not the same smattering of foreign lore they have themselves acquired.”<sup>33</sup> Coomaraswamy saw with great percipience “the disastrous results of a system of education which tends to sever the “educated” from national tradition and continuity with their past”<sup>34</sup>; the majority of the “educated” young men of Sri Lanka, concluded Coomaraswamy, “grow up in total ignorance of their own language, literature, and national traditions, and are estranged from the bulk of their fellow countrymen.”<sup>35</sup> It is this cultural estrangement, noticed much earlier by James Alwis, that Coomaraswamy too perceived to be the main consequence of “English education” in India and Sri Lanka.

Speaking specifically on Indian education through the English medium and its direful consequences on the Indians themselves and the share of the latter’s responsibility for the situation, Coomaraswamy declared forthrightly: “There is something radically wrong alike with England’s educational policy in India, and with Indians themselves in respect of their own readiness to cut themselves adrift from their past and become the hangers-on of a ruling race that in the main despises them or at the best misunderstands them.”<sup>36</sup> The products of the British colonial system of education grew up with no taste for their own traditional art: “In India, not only is the good part of Indian art quite ignored, but “educated” men are capable of understanding only the commonest academic art of Europe, and care nothing for the real masters of painting and sculpture. *What a commentary on the worthlessness of a century of so-called English education!*”<sup>37</sup>

It is with this awareness of the noxious consequences of the currently-popular system of English education that Coomaraswamy promulgated his own concept of a “National” education which he felt was so radical as to be tantamount to “an educational revolution.”<sup>38</sup> However, the “national” system of education that Coomaraswamy constantly refers to was never systematised or formalised by him in any single book or article; one of the tasks attempted in the present essay is to put together some of the hints, references, insights and remarks on colonial education that lie scattered in the writings and speeches of Coomaraswamy with the intention of re-creating, as far as possible, the alternative system of education which he would presumably have termed a system of “national education.” This scheme of national education was no quick or easy panacea, no magic formula, as Coomaraswamy himself appreciated: it would be a massive national undertaking which would necessitate not only the marshalling of the entire resources of the nation, but also the passage of a long period of time, perhaps half a century: “Even national education requires half a century to bear its fruits...the greatest work is done by those who scarcely look to see its fruits within their own life time.”<sup>39</sup> (This last remark was, indeed, a prophetic summing-up of Coomaraswamy’s own life-endavours).

33. *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 1, January 1906, p. 9.

34. *Ibid.*, no. 2, July 1906, p. 183.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

37. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, p. 86 (Emphasis added).

38. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 29.



The system of "National Education" that Coomaraswamy adumbrated in his writings sprang specifically from the socio-cultural context of India and Sri Lanka where the English education foisted upon the "native" population by the British quite clearly led to parallel deleterious effects in both countries. The educational model, imported into India and Sri Lanka almost wholesale from overseas, had its origin in the socio-cultural matrix of England, i.e., in a culture which was "alien" in many important respects to that in India and Sri Lanka. Its heavy English and Christian bias worked to the detriment of the indigenous languages and religions, as well as of the arts and crafts. These baneful effects of Western education have been described by Coomaraswamy *ad infinitum*. Coomaraswamy's diagnosis of the ill-effects of "English education" on the Indians and the Sri Lankans is very close both in idea as well as in diction to several earlier diagnoses by Indians, Sri Lankans and Englishmen: briefly, Coomaraswamy, like many of his predecessors, "found that those who were now known as "educated" in Ceylon were nothing more than *strangers in their own land*." <sup>40</sup> This theme of cultural estrangement, of alienation, is common to all contemporary critics of English education in India and Sri Lanka.<sup>41</sup> While Coomaraswamy placed himself firmly within a century-long tradition of radical protest against the *status quo* in education in India and Sri Lanka, he was particularly concerned with the deterioration of the indigenous crafts and fine arts under the influence of Western education and culture which openly displayed its hostility to Oriental culture. Coomaraswamy believed that the Easterners could get out of their spiritual and cultural *impasse* only through a regeneration of local traditional arts and crafts; thus, in *Art and Swadeshi*, he exhorted the Indians: "Try to believe in the regeneration of India through art, and not by politics and economics alone. Like Mr. Wavell, I would say to you: "The development of your artistic faculties will give back to India the creative force her people have lost". <sup>42</sup>

One of the concomitants of Western culture (based as it was, increasingly, on industrialisation and mechanisation) was the production of marketable commodities purely for monetary gain; Coomaraswamy, with William Morris and John Ruskin, (two thinkers who exercised a profound influence on him) understood the spiritually debilitating features of Western civilisation, which gave no important place to anything which was not considered "utilitarian". The writings of William Morris, in particular, exerted a profound influence on his early writings and the development of the consistent aesthetic which was to inform his later work, and give it that characteristic polemical reformist quality as well as ecumenical point of view. Echoing William Morris, Coomaraswamy expanded his views on Western civilisation and culture as follows, defining his individualistic concept of "culture" in the process:

Culture includes a view of life essentially balanced, where real and false values are not confused; also, I think a certain knowledge of, or interest in, things which are not directly utilitarian, that is to say, which do not merely give pleasure to the senses or confirm a prejudice. We should consider whether men or things are the greatest possession of a nation.<sup>43</sup>

40. *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 8, 1909, p. 69.

41. See, for example, Sir George Birdwood's remarks quoted above, and Coomaraswamy, *Am I My Brother's Keeper?* (p. 3): "Systems of education should be extensions of the cultures of the peoples concerned."

42. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, p. 5.

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 36.

Coomaraswamy's views regarding the baneful effects of mechanisation on the course of civilisation are remarkably similar to William Morris' views on the subject;<sup>44</sup> according to both writers, mechanisation inevitably dries up the artistic sensibility of a nation at its sources. Said Coomaraswamy: "Machinery, in fact, has not enriched our home life. Even if it has brought to us the treasures of the ends of the earth, we have a heavy price to pay for these, nothing less than the destruction of such art at its very sources."<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, in Coomaraswamy's view (as in Morris'), machinery had become the master instead of the servant that it rightly should have been in a true civilisation: "The place of machinery in a true civilisation should be that of a servant, and not a master."<sup>46</sup> It was such a hollow civilisation in which the arts had no place that the West had given to India (and Sri Lanka) through its much-vaunted "English" education; the system was instrumental in producing a generation of denationalised misfits. It was on such foundations that Coomaraswamy constructed his severe indictment of contemporary Indian and Sri Lankan education. He traces the limitations and vicious aspects of Indian education to the roots as follows: "The real difficulty at the root of all questions of Indian education is this, that modern education in India, the education which Englishmen are proud of having "given" to India is really based on a general assumption (quite universal in England) that India is a *savage* country,<sup>47</sup> which it is England's divine mission to civilise."<sup>48</sup>

Coomaraswamy's ideal of a "National Education" is perhaps best epitomised in the following sentences:

It is a question of national education. I would see Indians united in a demand for a complete and entire control of Indian education in all its branches and determined that *that education shall produce Indian men and women*—not mere clerks or makers of pretty curiosities for passing tourists... To this end one thing is needful—that the present generation of "educated" Indians should cease to be snobs... the Herculean task... is a conversion of a generation of parasites into a nation of Orientals.<sup>49</sup>

In other words, the Indians, as a result of their English education, had lost their national identity, had become "de-culturised", had lost their "Indianness"; a pre-requisite of national progress, therefore, was the implementation of a system of national education which could restore the "Indianness" of the

44. Cf. "A civilisation that is too apt to boast in after-dinner speeches, too apt to thrust her blessings on far-off peoples at the canon's mouth" (Morris, 'Art and Beauty of Truth,' *Works*, vol XXII, p. 170); "While we are met here in Birmingham," he said at the beginning of 1879, "to further the spread of education in art, Englishmen in India are... actively destroying the very sources of that education—jewellery, metal-work, pottery, calico-printing, brocade-weaving, carpet-making—all the famous and historical arts of the great peninsula have been... thrust aside for the advantage of any paltry scrap of so-called commerce." (Morris, 'The Art of the People,' *Works*, vol. XXII, p. 36). "The danger," Morris declared in a lecture, "is that the present course of civilisation will destroy the beauty of life." (*Ibid.*, p. 53).

45. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, p. 34.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

47. Indeed, Coomaraswamy's entire body of writings, his life and work, could be described as a concerted attempt to demonstrate the fact that the East was more civilised and "cultured" than the West, as demonstrated by the surviving artistic heritage of the Eastern nations.

48. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, p. 67.

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70. (Emphasis added).

Indians, and “re-nationalise” the “denationalised”. Elsewhere, Coomaraswamy remarks that the products of Western education in India and Sri Lanka turned out to be not “educated” individuals in the true sense of the word, but men whose “soul” had been “destroyed.”<sup>50</sup>

One of the most serious consequences of the alien English education then prevalent in India and Sri Lanka, according to Coomaraswamy, was its distorting effect on the appreciation of the arts, the degradation of artistic taste and sensibility:

In India, not only is the good part of Indian art quite ignored, but “educated” men are capable of understanding only the commonest academic art of Europe.<sup>51</sup>

What may seem to be an undue prominence given to arts and crafts may be understood only if one considers the fact that for Coomaraswamy, the very viability of a nation rested on the state of its literature, fine arts, and handicrafts, as expressed in the quotation that follows: talking of the poems of Rabindranath Tagore, for example, Coomaraswamy said:

For nations are destroyed or flourish in proportion as their poetry, painting and music are destroyed or flourish...It is the work of poets (poet, painter, sculptor, musician, “artist”—all these are synonymous) to make their hearers free: it is they alone who establish the status of nations.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, to Coomaraswamy, education had to be “national” in several senses; obviously, as James Alwis had already argued,<sup>53</sup> it had to be based on the local languages of the pupils themselves; in addition, and perhaps equally or even more important, it had to be founded on the cultural traditions of the learners (their literature, arts and crafts). It is this second aspect that is throughout emphasised by Coomaraswamy, an aspect which not only the imperialists but even the so-called “nationalists” had ignored: “Neither the Nationalist nor Imperialist educators are concerned with that all-important part of education described by Ruskin as a cherishing of local associations and hereditary skill. I could wish to persuade these teachers that education appears as much in doing as in knowing things—that craftsmanship is a mode of thought.”<sup>54</sup> Incidentally, the last sentence in the above paragraph, with its stress on learning through practical work experience as opposed to the theory-oriented acquisition of a mass of facts and information, reads like an extract from an ultra-modern socialistic treatise on education; this idea of education through work experience has been incorporated into the educational structure of Sri Lanka only in recent years.<sup>55</sup>

50. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, p. 175; *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 2, July 1906, p. 194.

51. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, p. 86. (Emphasis added).

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143.

53. For details, see the article referred to in fn. 3 above.

54. Coomaraswamy, *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon*, p. xii.

55. Work-experience became an integral feature of secondary education in Sri Lanka only after the educational reforms introduced in 1972.

The tragedy of the Indians was that the so-called English-educated among them became completely insensitive and indifferent to their artistic tradition, especially to their traditional folk arts and handicrafts; as Coomaraswamy pointed out, "Ninety-nine of a hundred university-educated Indians are perfectly indifferent to them"<sup>56</sup> (i.e., to Indian handicrafts). In Coomaraswamy's eyes, a nation's art is inextricably woven into the fabric of the life and prosperity of its citizens, and English education, which opened the way for the neglect and probable obliteration of a people's culture had, perforce, to be replaced by a "National" system of education which would be built upon a strong foundation of national cultural traditions. The core of Coomaraswamy's philosophy of education is perhaps best epitomised in the following short and pithy sentence in *Am I My Brother's Keeper?*: "Systems of education should be extensions of the cultures of peoples concerned; but of these the Western educator knows little and cares less."<sup>57</sup> To Coomaraswamy, the most damning feature of colonial English education was its complete disregard of (and even contempt for) Indian and Sri Lankan culture (and especially art), the consequences of which he (perhaps prophetically) predicted would be as follows: "The disintegration of a people's art is the destruction of their life, by which they are reduced to the proletarian status of hewers of wood and drawers of water, in the interests of a foreign trader whose is the profit."<sup>58</sup>

The bases of contemporary industrialised civilisation, to Coomaraswamy, were "to such a degree rotten to the core that it has been forgotten even by the learned that men ever attempted to live otherwise than by bread alone."<sup>59</sup> The attempt to "export" Western education, "civilisation", and "culture" to the East clearly infuriated Coomaraswamy, as his tone in the following passage (directly addressed to the "exporters" of the West) reveals:

"The export of your 'education' is even more nefarious than your traffic in arms."

for what took place in India and Sri Lanka followed faithfully the very same pattern that had been witnessed previously in Ireland where

"the children (were) taught, if nothing else, to be ashamed of their own parents, ashamed of their own nationality, ashamed of their own names."<sup>60</sup>

Here, quite clearly, Coomaraswamy has arrived at a conclusion similar to the one that James Alwis and a host of other, lesser known native and foreign intellectuals and men of letters<sup>61</sup> had expressed (though often in less eloquent

56. Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon*, p. 24.

57. Coomaraswamy, *Am I my Brother's Keeper?* p. 3.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

60. Coomaraswamy, *Ibid.*, p. 9. The quotation is from Douglas Hyde, *Literary History of Ireland*, 1899, pp. 630-44.

61. For details regarding other similar attitudes to colonial English education, see the article referred to in fn. 3.

terms than Coomaraswamy): the creation of a class of denationalised, rootless individuals. Such denationalised individuals, because of their Western education, could not guard themselves against what Coomaraswamy himself had warned the East against: they would become "a queer mixture of East and West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere,"<sup>62</sup> a set of individuals who had fallen "between two stools and do not know (their) own minds."<sup>63</sup>

The pattern, as Coomaraswamy declared, was quite familiar: "English education", pursued with deliberateness and often with ruthless determination had produced the results that had been expected originally "when they (i.e., the British) proposed to build up a class of persons "Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Lord Macaulay, *Minute on Education*, 1835). It was the self-same policy that was being put into practice in Middletown in America in the early 20th century (when Coomaraswamy was writing); its effects had already been aptly demonstrated in the case of Ireland, where, as a result of British colonial policy, "in thirty years Irish was killed off so rapidly that the whole island contained fewer speakers in 1891 than the small province of Connaught alone did thirty years before;"<sup>64</sup> and it was the high probability of the process being repeated in the Eastern colonies of the British Empire that aroused Coomaraswamy's vehement denunciation of British educational policy in these territories.

Proceeding to anatomise in psychological terms the hypocritical and self-deceptive "civilising mission" of the British, Coomaraswamy proceeded to tell the British colonialists: "What you call your "civilising mission" is in our eyes nothing but a form of megalomania. Whatever we need to learn from you, we shall come back to ask you for as the need is felt. At the same time if you choose to visit us, you will be welcome guests, and if there is anything of ours that you admire, we shall say, it is yours."<sup>65</sup> Coomaraswamy's unequivocal stand against contemporary Western civilisation and culture, his indictment of the British for their ruthlessness, are clearly expressed in the tone and attitude of such passages. Moreover, Coomaraswamy was convinced that the British were not acting in the manner that they did through ignorance, foolishness, or above all a sense of superiority over the illiterate masses of the East. To Coomaraswamy, it was a policy pursued with great deliberateness; he questioned the very motives and ethics of British colonial policy, exposing the fact that the process could ultimately be characterised psychologically as stemming from a deep and humiliating (though probably unconscious) sense of cultural inferiority, a psychological conflict:

Our (i.e. of the British) educational activities abroad...are motivated by an *intention* to destroy existing cultures. And that is not only, I think, because of our conviction of the absolute superiority of our *kultur*, and consequent contempt and hatred for whatever else we have not understood...but grounded in an unconscious and deep-rooted envy

62. Coomaraswamy, *The Religious Basis of the Forms of Indian Society*, p. 50.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

64. Coomaraswamy, *Am I My Brother's Keeper?* p. 9.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

of the serenity and leisure that we cannot help but recognise in people whom we call "unspoiled." It irks us that these others, who are neither, as we are, industrialised nor, as we are, 'democratic', should nevertheless be *contented*; we feel bound to discontent them and especially to discontent their women, who might learn from us to work in factories or to find careers...<sup>66</sup>

It should be observed that although in his writings and speeches Coomaraswamy severely debunked the contemporary system of English education in India and Sri Lanka, and expressed much admiration for the traditional Eastern educational systems and institutions, he never advocated a return to the latter *in toto*. For example, Coomaraswamy quite clearly saw that the Eastern system of education, though perhaps well suited to the earlier epochs of Eastern history, had its own limitations. Having furnished a brief account of the system of education prevalent in mediaeval Sri Lanka, for instance, Coomaraswamy remarked: "The old system of education above discussed (i.e., in *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*) could not have been preserved in its entirety; it is in many respects unsuited to modern requirements, besides having intrinsic faults."<sup>67</sup> Coomaraswamy was thus never a traditionalist in the derogatory sense of the word; but what he was protesting against at the same time was

that so many of its real advantages (i.e., of the traditional educational system) are lacking in the modern system, and especially unfortunate that an "English education" such as the Royal College provides, leaves the "educated" ignorant of everything that would appear to be of special interest and value to him, and unable to hand on to others even that knowledge which he possesses of the great world beyond, and the lesson he has learnt from a study of the history and manners of other peoples.<sup>68</sup>

In short, the system of "National Education" as conceived by Coomaraswamy would be an amalgam in which the advantages both of the modern Western system of education as well as of the traditional Eastern system would be preserved. It would be "a general education on the lines of Eastern culture with the elements of Western culture (particularly science) best suited to the needs of the time,"<sup>69</sup> a system which would not lead to "the slow poisoning of the spiritual life,"<sup>70</sup> and cultural alienation.

Coomaraswamy's criticism of the prevalent system of education was not always couched in general terms as in the quotations above. He makes concrete, specific criticisms of the system as then functioning in Sri Lanka in his articles written for the *Ceylon National Review* in 1906 and 1907. In these articles, Coomaraswamy describes how the British educational system inevitably led not only to a neglect of but even a contempt for the mother tongue of the pupils, their traditional culture, local history, geography, and arts and crafts: "The children are sent as a rule to schools and colleges where their own language is not taught at all and where they learn next to nothing of their own land, its

66. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

67. Coomaraswamy, *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, p. 51.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 1, January 1906, p. iii.

70. Coomaraswamy, *The Religious Basis of the Forms of Indian Society*, p. 31.

71. *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 1, January 1906, p. 9.

history, art, or literature. They grow up divorced from their own traditions and ignorant of their own civilisation and its worth.”<sup>71</sup> James Alwis and others had already protested against the neglect of the indigenous languages and literatures in the late 1860s, but Coomaraswamy went further to imply that the mere restoration of the indigenous languages (Sinhalese and Tamil) as the media of instruction in schools would not suffice—that, on the contrary, Sri Lankan education should be founded not only on the mother-tongues of the pupils, but also on their own local history, geography, art, handicrafts, etc. Education, in other words, should be a kind of voyage of intellectual discovery in which the student would gain a deep knowledge of his indigenous cultural heritage and its intrinsic worth. (Indeed, Coomaraswamy’s own *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art* was the result of such a voyage of cultural discovery, but of course at the scholarly level).

The immediate reason for the neglect of indigenous culture during the formative years of the students’ lives, pointed out Coomaraswamy, was that under the prevalent system it had become obligatory for them to prepare for London and Cambridge public examinations, which in turn dictated the nature of the school curricula at the time:

The examinations which determined school curricula in Ceylon are the Cambridge Locals, and the Matriculation and Intermediate examinations of the University of London. Ceylon is the largest Cambridge-Local centre outside England, sending up 700 candidates. The Government also holds a special “University Scholarship Examination” in English and Latin and Greek, and English and Mathematics and Natural Science in alternate years, the successful scholars proceeding to an English University.<sup>72</sup>

To Coomaraswamy, no education could be termed complete or even satisfactory as long as it ignored the mother-tongue of the pupil; consequently, he declared as late as 1906: “There is not a secondary school in Colombo where a Tamil can receive an education worthy the name, nor is there likely to be, until government insists on the efficient teaching of Tamil or Sinhalese in all government schools.”<sup>73</sup> The net result of the employment of unsuitable curricula in schools was that “not only are Oriental studies not encouraged in Ceylon, but it is well-nigh *impossible* for a student to devote any time to his own language and literature if he is to succeed in the school examinations and especially if he is aiming at the University scholarship. So the majority of the “educated” young men of Ceylon<sup>74</sup> grow up in total ignorance of their own language, literature, and national traditions, and are estranged<sup>75</sup> from the bulk of their fellow countrymen.”<sup>76</sup> The disastrous ultimate consequence of the process was “to sever the “educated” from national tradition and continuity with their past.”<sup>77</sup> Here, as well as in his other writings, Coomaraswamy displays a greater sense of the psychological importance of cultural and literary tradition than James

72. *Ibid.*, no. 2, July 1906, p. 183.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

74. A typical case of such an “English-educated” young man was James Alwis (1823-1878) who belonged to the generation immediately preceding that of Coomaraswamy.

75. Note how the word “estranged” occurs in the writings of both James Alwis and Ananda Coomaraswamy on English education in Sri Lanka.

76. *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 2, July 1906, p. 183.

77. *Ibid.*

Alwis, whose interest was confined to language and literature. For example, Coomaraswamy demonstrated how far-reaching the pernicious effects of the colonial system of education would be: it would ultimately lead to the obliteration of the identity of the entire nation, and to "mental sterilisation", as Coomaraswamy called it; it would "sap the very foundations of these peoples' individuality and independence of thought. The consequent separation from all local emotion has an extraordinary effect in sterilising the minds of the Ceylon or Indian youth. What else indeed could be expected from an educational ideal involving the obliteration of a people's own language, literature, music and art and their replacement by masses of ill-digested information imparted in another language?"<sup>78</sup>

However, it is essential to note that although Coomaraswamy thus pleaded for the restoration of Sinhalese and Tamil to their due place on the school curriculum, he did not at any time attempt to devalue the importance of English in India or in Sri Lanka, for he declared forthrightly: "It is not, of course, the teaching of English to which we object, but the neglect of the mother-tongue. We all recognise the importance of English."<sup>79</sup> Coomaraswamy's attitude towards the English language (as opposed to "English education") is consonant with what he had asserted elsewhere, that a "National" education for Sri Lanka or India would be an amalgamation of the best features of the educational systems of both the East and the West. Speaking of education in India, Coomaraswamy was quite categorical about his attitude toward English which was then the *lingua franca* of many areas of the world: "Do not think that I am at all opposed to the study of English in addition to the mother-tongue: on the contrary the people of India will do well to take every advantage of their opportunities of becoming a bilingual people."<sup>80</sup> Not only was English a kind of international language in many parts of the globe; it was also a "link" or "bridge" language within India itself, facilitating intercommunication between different linguistic and racial groups, and a key to human culture: "English is the *lingua franca* enabling men of the various races of India to communicate with one another, and a knowledge of it is indispensable in any broad scheme of general culture. For all that, English can never replace, can never even equal in importance the student's own language."<sup>81</sup>

As the last two quotations above make clear, English was to be replaced (in first place of importance in India and Sri Lanka) by the indigenous languages, but English was to remain as the most important international as well as a "link" language to be used for intercommunication between different linguistic communities. It should be noted therefore that Coomaraswamy was far ahead of the political leaders of his time in that the agitation in favour of the use of "Swabasha" arose considerably later in India and Sri Lanka, and indeed the relative positions that Coomaraswamy advocated for the Swabasha and English were recognised legally only half a century later in India and Sri Lanka.<sup>82</sup> Thus, like James Alwis, Coomaraswamy advocated a healthy bilingualism, with the indigenous languages enjoying pride of place, but with English occupy-

78. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

81. *Ibid.*

82. In Sri Lanka Sinhalese was declared the official language (a position enjoyed up to that year by English) in 1956.



ing a secondary—but highly important—position: “Let him then know well his own tongue and also English.”<sup>83</sup>

The attempt to teach Greek, Latin and French in addition to English in India and Sri Lanka, however, was a different matter altogether. Coomaraswamy ridiculed the attempts to teach French in Sri Lanka schools as being “the greatest farce imaginable,”<sup>84</sup> describing how

Girls in English schools spend their time in learning by heart a smattering of French grammar, though they will most probably never meet a Frenchman or see a French book, nor, if they did, would the knowledge gained suffice to enable them to talk to the one or read the other. It would be about as much use to teach English girls the rudiments of Chinese.<sup>85</sup>

Regarding the compulsory study of Greek, Coomaraswamy said:

Even for English students the compulsory study of Greek for examinations has a doubtful value as a means of culture, because those who take it up unwillingly will never reach that goal,

but the plight of the Ceylonese pupil was much more pitiful, being similar to that of “an English student who was compelled to study Chinese as his principal language, Sanskrit and Old Japanese as his classical languages and Burmese as an extra modern language... What an outcry there would be; yet I have drawn no extravagant parallel to European education approved in Ceylon.”<sup>86</sup>

While “dead” languages like Latin and Greek, and other modern European languages like French were thus worse than useless to Indian and Sri Lankan students, the pupils’ own mother-tongue was of supreme import. Coomaraswamy was perhaps unique for his time in recognising that no significant literature of world standard could be produced by Indians or Sri Lankans in English: “I believe no Indian ever has produced, or ever will produce, immortal literature in English... The Indians’ own language must ever remain the means by which he can most simply, most truly and most naturally express his deepest feelings, and the tongue which can alone appeal to his inmost self with all the power of association and tradition.”<sup>87</sup> The judgement in the first sentence of the above quotation has been supported by research at least with regard to Sri Lankan literature in English.<sup>88</sup>

Thus Coomaraswamy arrives at the same conclusion that James Alwis had reached nearly three decades earlier, that a healthy bilingualism would serve the contemporary needs and interests of the Sri Lankan and the Indian better than a pure “English” education in which the mother-tongue of the pupil was virtually neglected.

83. *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 2, July 1906, p. 185.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

87. *Ibid.*

88. See Goonaratne, *op. cit.*, ch. xiii.

It would not, however, be correct to believe that Coomaraswamy was de-emphasising the humanitarian value of the classical languages with their valuable literatures when he advocated the abolition of the teaching of Latin and Greek. In place of Greek and Latin, Coomaraswamy recommended for the Indian and Sri Lankan pupil, the study of "Sanskrit, whose literature is the pride and glory of the people of India, in which are set down the deepest thoughts of their most revered teachers and in which are written the noble epics which appeal to us all, not less now than 2000 years ago."<sup>89</sup> The Western classical languages were not to be excluded altogether, however: "By all means let all those who can and will study the western classics, do so, as indeed many cultured Indians do today."<sup>90</sup> But, as in the case of creative writing in English by Indians and Sri Lankans, Coomaraswamy saw the impossibility and futility of a majority of Indians and Sri Lankans attempting to become Western classical and English scholars rather than Oriental scholars; if at all, they should direct their scholarship towards their own classical languages and literatures and attempt to make them familiar to Western scholars, as a few like James Alwis<sup>91</sup> and Coomaraswamy's own father Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy<sup>92</sup> had done. "Surely", said Coomaraswamy, "the natural thing is for a majority of Indians to be more or less Oriental scholars, as it should be natural for a majority of Englishmen to be more or less English scholars."<sup>93</sup> Basing himself on the same reasoning, Coomaraswamy conceived of the University of Ceylon (which had not been established at the time he wrote) as the future centre of excellence for Oriental (i.e., especially Pali and Sanskrit) studies.<sup>94</sup>

It has been shown above that Coomaraswamy had nothing but whole-hearted condemnation and contempt for the system of colonial "English" education of the British public school type that prevailed in Sri Lanka and India during the beginning of the 20th century. Again, like James Alwis, Coomaraswamy was not content with destructive criticism; he clearly attempted to formulate in his own mind, if not in a single place in writing, a scheme of education that would be appropriate for Sri Lanka and India (and perhaps for any country). Coomaraswamy comes nearest to a formulation of his own system of "national" education in his speech on "Education in Ceylon"<sup>95</sup> delivered at a rather informal after-dinner gathering in London. The most that can be attempted in the present study, therefore, is to piece together the numerous remarks, hints and pronouncements on the ideal system of education that Coomaraswamy contemplated formulating on some future occasion, but which he never did in writing.

89. *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 2, July 1906, p. 185.

90. *Ibid.*

91. For example, James Alwis translated the *Sidat Sangarawa*, the classical grammar of the Sinhalese language into English, with a scholarly introduction of 286 pages in 1852; he also translated into English the *Attanagalu Vansa* and *Kachchayana's Grammar* from the Pali.

92. For details regarding Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy's translations, see fn. 14 above.

93. *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 2, July 1906, pp. 185-86.

94. See below, pp. 97 ff. for Coomaraswamy's proposals regarding the establishment of a University in Sri Lanka. However, his proposals (and those of many other nationalist leaders) were not much heeded at the time, and a University College affiliated to the University of London was set up only in 1921. The University College became a full-fledged University only in 1942.

95. Reprinted in *Art and Swadeshi*, pp. 174-93.

The alternative system that Ananda Coomaraswamy proposed to substitute in place of the lop-sided, outmoded and ill-suited system of colonial English education in India and Sri Lanka was termed by him as a "National Education". One of the principal pre-requisites of a national system of education was, as has already been shown, the restoration of the mother-tongue of the pupils to the place of supreme importance in the regular school curriculum. While one "medium" of education would thus be the students' mother-tongue, there would be another: "The medium of their own national culture...(for) European culture, when it replaces, instead of supplementing Eastern culture, does not develop the peoples' intelligence but the very contrary."<sup>96</sup> A "National" education would thus be imparted through these dual media; it is the latter element or ingredient that was perhaps of supreme significance in Coomaraswamy's contemplated system of a truly "national" education, for, as is well known, his own deepest interests and sympathies lay in the direction of traditional Eastern culture, especially traditional Oriental arts and crafts, research into which became his life's work.<sup>97</sup>

It was the complete and ruthless disregard for Sri Lanka's national culture that compelled Coomaraswamy to turn against the British and their hollow system of "modern education". For example, this is what Coomaraswamy had to say about education in Sri Lanka after having spent a number of years in the Island, as head of the Geological Survey of Ceylon:

The educated Sinhalese of today, after, on the one hand, a century of foreign government and of education in which the national culture has been completely ignored, and, on the other hand, an equal period of subservient and obsequious imitation of foreign manners, have little reason to be proud of their present achievement in the Art of Living.<sup>98</sup>

"The (Sinhalese) people", he added, "take but little interest in education... The officially recognised system of education, based on examinations such as the Cambridge Locals and London University examinations, has no place for any aspect of the national culture—history, music, art or religion. It appeals only to the material interests, with the result that originality and initiative are destroyed."<sup>99</sup>

To Coomaraswamy, art was no luxury but an integral and functional component of living itself; one of his most passionate declarations was that the influence of modern Western civilization, with its industrialisation and especially the mechanisation of production, had already destroyed a good deal of traditional Eastern art. As Coomaraswamy pointed out sardonically, under "the beneficial civilising missionaries" of the West, "roads and railways, jails and law courts, schools and bridges and all the material paraphernalia of civilisation are bountifully provided, but unfortunately the production of art and literature has ceased."<sup>100</sup> Under the influence of Western education, the

96. *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 4, July 1907, p. 20.

97. For a bibliography of Coomaraswamy's writings, see *Ars Islamica*, vol. ix, 1942, pp. 125-42.

98. Coomaraswamy, *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, p. vi.

99. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

100. *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 1, January 1906, p. 8.

artistic taste of the "educated" Easterners had become perverted, they were only "satisfying themselves with the husks of such tenth-rate Western art as may be seen in our homes and covering our bodies today." <sup>101</sup>

The decline of Eastern art was attributed by Coomaraswamy both to the "apathy and denationalisation of the (native) upper classes, leading them to care only for foreign manufactured goods, and to despise those made by their own countrymen," <sup>102</sup> as well as to their alien ruler (the British imperialist) who is "separated from the life of its people, (and) has, perhaps can have, no sympathy with their ideals, regards their art as barbaric, their music as painful, their dress as indecent, their religion as idolatory and does not fail to give clear expression to their views." <sup>103</sup> In short, the fault was on both sides, the rulers as well as the ruled: "There is something radically wrong alike with Britain's educational policy in India, and with Indians themselves in respect of their own readiness to cut themselves adrift from their past and to become the hangers-on of a ruling race that in the main despises them or at the best misunderstands them." <sup>104</sup> Once again the parallel with James Alwis is remarkable: like the latter nearly three decades earlier, Coomaraswamy launches a two-pronged attack against both the British imperialists and his own (in this instance Indian) compatriots. Coomaraswamy, however, attacks the British imperialist much more directly than Alwis did in his writings. <sup>105</sup>

Coomaraswamy's observations on the system of Western education prevalent in the early 20th century in Sri Lanka and in India, and his proposals for its radical reform (i.e., his scheme of a truly "national" education as he termed it), are contained principally in his speech on "Education in Ceylon" printed in his collection of essays *Art and Swadeshi*, and in the report of a speech he made in London on December 19, 1908. <sup>106</sup> Talking about education in Sri Lanka, Coomaraswamy said that he had found that "those who were now known as educated in Ceylon were nothing more than strangers in their own land". Three years later, speaking at a similar gathering, again in London, <sup>107</sup> he described education as the most pressing problem which awaited the consideration of the Indians and the Sri Lankans at the time: "I believe that the greatest work before us in India and Ceylon...is that of reforming and reconstructing our education." <sup>108</sup> Castigating the Sri Lankans as having, during the 19th century, developed "in the direction of intellectual parasitism", <sup>109</sup> and thus having created nothing worthwhile in art or literature, <sup>110</sup> he pointed out that "in the ultimate judgement which is passed upon nations in the course of time, nations are judged by what they have created and not by what they have assimilated or by their prosperity commercial or financial, considered at any given period." <sup>111</sup>

101. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

103. *Ibid.*, no. 2, July 1906, p. 181.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

105. See the article on James Alwis mentioned in fn. 3.

106. For a report of this speech, see *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 8, 1909, pp. 62-69.

107. Speech delivered as Chairman, Annual Ceylon Dinner, December 1911.

108. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, pp. 182-83.

109. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

110. "Our national genius is no longer creative." *Ibid.*, p. 180.

111. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

For this decline in indigenous traditional art, the Sri Lankans had to blame mainly themselves, for, as Coomaraswamy admitted in a tone of tragic and ironical recrimination, allowing themselves to be westernised:

*We have allowed to fall into decay and disrepute all those elements in our culture which constitute its greatness, and we have acquired in exchange only a too superficial veneer of that Western civilisation which is in Ceylon doled out to us in the name of English education, a name for which I have too much respect to think that that which goes by it in Ceylon has any right to do so.* <sup>112</sup>

The most serious drawback of Sri Lankan and Indian education in the early 20th century as Coomaraswamy saw it, was what he characterised as its basic "unreality" and its "secular" character. When he used the term "secular" Coomaraswamy did not mean that Sri Lankan education was unsatisfactory because it was not directly controlled by, or closely tied up with, a particular religion, indigenous or alien; <sup>113</sup> the idea he really wished to convey was that education at the time "does not stir our imagination or awaken in us any sense of wonder," <sup>114</sup> i.e., the spirit of scholarly inquiry. Similarly, in using the word "unreal" to describe Sri Lankan education, he was referring to its lack of relationship to the pupils' "experience and the ideals which we already accept" (i.e., the traditional Oriental philosophy of ethics and life-values). Quoting Ruskin with obvious approval, Coomaraswamy then proceeds to expand upon the main criterion on which his own concept of a system of national education was to be constructed, in a passage which may be considered as the key to his theory and philosophy of education (this is a quotation from Ruskin):

If you find yourself set in a position of authority and are entrusted to determine modes of education, ascertain first what the people you would teach have been in the habit of doing, and encourage them to do that better. Set no other excellence before their eyes, disturb none of their reverence for the past, do not think yourselves bound to dispel their ignorance, or to contradict their superstitions; teach them only gentleness and truth; redeem them by example from habits which you know to be unhealthy and degrading; but cherish above all things local associations and hereditary skills. <sup>115</sup>

In other words, education had to be closely bound up with traditional practices, especially traditional art, crafts, and occupations; it was expected to strengthen, not to undermine or destroy sacred ancient local traditions. Clearly, this philosophy of education was diametrically opposed to the British colonialist policy on education both in India and in Sri Lanka.

Having accepted the definition of an acceptable national scheme of education as expressed by Ruskin, Coomaraswamy proceeds to ask his fellow-countrymen (temporarily gathered in London): "Now, gentlemen, what is there in the education which is given us today in Ceylon which cherishes local

112. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

113. Indeed, at the turn of the century, education both in Sri Lanka and in India was to a great extent in the hands of the Christian missionaries.

114. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, p. 181.

115. *Ibid.*, pp. 181-82. The quotation is from Ruskin.

associations and hereditary skill?" To this question Coomaraswamy himself provides the inevitable (sarcastic) answer: "Modern education in Ceylon does the opposite of this," and elaborates on the point as follows:

It does so from the time, when in the infant school, children are taught to spell out "Johnny picked the apple" without having any conception of what an apple tree may be to the time when our young ladies who are working for the Cambridge Locals are taught as a finishing accomplishment, a little French, or, as I have heard in one case, what was asked for by the parents as "a few strokes on the violin" before she left.<sup>116</sup>

However, Coomaraswamy felt that at the time he wrote, there was a greater need for the proper planning of secondary education than of elementary education, and also that prominence had to be given (at least at the commencement) to the education of a selected few (than to that of the masses through literacy campaigns and schemes of adult education). It is important to note, however, that Coomaraswamy does not imply that the "selected few" be limited to, or drawn from, only the native aristocracy, as was then happening. Thus, Coomaraswamy declared: "What we need is the education of leaders, and that education of leaders means the education of ourselves," but this was not because he wished education to be the preserve of an *elite*. On the contrary, (paradoxically and ironically enough), Coomaraswamy felt that "the illiterate are in some ways better off than we, for they have only to learn, but for too many of us, we have a great deal to unlearn."<sup>117</sup> It was really the elite that urgently *needed* a national education, not the illiterate, for, according to Coomaraswamy, the latter were already more "educated" in the real sense than the former.

Now follow Coomaraswamy's concrete proposals for the reform of education in Sri Lanka, the alternative system which he often characterised as the ideal type of a "national education". This 'national' scheme of education would be centrally placed in the local Sri Lankan cultural ethos and would be closely related especially to the country's traditional arts, crafts and occupations. The first practical necessity for the Island at the time he wrote, according to Coomaraswamy, was "a local University", for the important reason that education could never be inspiring unless it was imbued with a spirit of inquiry, "where research and discovery are going forward and the spirit of wonder is felt."<sup>118</sup> Moreover, such a Sri Lankan University had to be controlled by the Sri Lankans themselves, not because they were fully qualified to carry on these affairs, but because responsibility (Coomaraswamy hoped) "would make them bound in honour to qualify themselves."<sup>119</sup> Coomaraswamy threw out a pithy and very highly relevant remark pregnant with meaning when he declared that Education in Sri Lanka "should be more *European in spirit and less European in form*,"<sup>120</sup> again emphasising the fact that, as with regard to other aspects of Westernisation, in respect of education too the Sri Lankans had only imitated the superficial paraphernalia of Western education.

Coomaraswamy, however, did not at any time attempt to prepare a complete blueprint for a future system of education for Sri Lanka; he only indicated

116. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

117. *Ibid.*, pp. 183, 184.

118. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

119. *Ibid.*

120. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

the main guidelines for such a system. First of all, Coomaraswamy suggested that a committee be set up for the purpose of going thoroughly into the problem. The members of this committee would, as a preliminary step, gain a thorough knowledge and insight into all that was progressive in the field of education all over the world, in the West as well as in the East. Said Coomaraswamy: "I should like to see deputations of Ceylonese young men sent to Europe, to Denmark, France, Hungary, Finland, Ireland, and also to America and Japan to study what is being done by leaders of education there, see what experiments are being made, and learn what education really means."<sup>121</sup> This, however, would not be adequate by itself; the members of the committee should, in addition, not only be firmly grounded in Eastern history and Oriental culture but should also come under the direct and personal influence and tutelage of some of the national leaders of the East, and scholars who were in sympathy with Oriental culture: "I should like them also to come under the personal influence of men like Professor Geddes and women like the late Sister Nivedita."<sup>122</sup> It was only after such a serious training that the members of the committee would be "qualified by knowledge and responsibility as they should be even now by inheritance, to shape and create."<sup>123</sup>

Coomaraswamy next proceeds to submit his own views on the reorganisation of Sri Lankan education, in the form of a few hints that he would wish to place before the hypothetical National Education Committee that he has thus proposed be established. Top priority in Coomaraswamy's system would be given to increases in the salaries of teachers, for Coomaraswamy clearly felt that the first step in improving Sri Lankan education should be to restore to the teaching profession the dignified and honourable place that was its due, and which had been degraded under Sri Lanka's British rulers. Good salaries were essential also to attract the best talent in the country to the teaching profession. Thus Coomaraswamy's first concrete proposal was couched in the following terms: "Let more money be spent on education, not more men, not more schools, but higher salaries for teachers, sufficient to secure the services of leaders, for men are of more consequence than curricula."<sup>124</sup> It should be remembered in this context that the teaching profession was one of the most poorly paid in the Island at the turn of the century.<sup>125</sup> Indeed, Coomaraswamy felt at this time that wherever suitably qualified and experienced teachers could not be obtained locally, they should be recruited abroad. "Let them (i.e., the authorities) seek for these leaders," said Coomaraswamy, "in every part of the world, in America, Europe, India and Japan, wherever they may be found, as well as in Ceylon, and give them power."<sup>126</sup> Significantly, Coomaraswamy wanted all the power to be given to the teachers themselves, not to a

121. *Ibid.*

122. *Ibid.*

123. *Ibid.*

124. *Ibid.*

125. The teaching profession was one of the most poorly paid professions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Cf. "The teachers' pay and prospects remained the main stumbling block of the schools. There was very small prospect of promotion and most men settled down to a perfunctory performance of their duties. Assistants (Assistant teachers) were paid £36 to £72 (per year)". L. J. Gratiaen, *English Schools in Ceylon, 1870-1900*, Colombo, 1933, p. 9. Rev. Kalukondayawe Pragnasekera records in his autobiography that one of his brothers, a school teacher, was paid a salary of Rs. 9 per month (i.e., approx. £1). Rev. Kalukondayawe Pragnasekera, *Swayamlikhita Sri Pragnasekera Charitapadanaya*, Sri Press, Wellampitiya, 1970, p. 6.

126. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, pp. 185-86.

governmental bureaucracy. In fact, the greatest danger which educational policy had to be guarded against was a reactionary bureaucracy, as Coomaraswamy declared quite unequivocally: "Do not let them (i.e., the individuals who wield power in the field of education) be, unless in exceptional cases, officials of any kind." <sup>127</sup>

The reorganisation of educational policy in Sri Lanka, to be effective at all, had to be motivated, according to Coomaraswamy, by one primary end in view: the chief task of such an overhaul would be to bring into close harmony the system of education with the Sri Lankan life of the contemporary period, with the aim of achieving "the full recognition of our intellectual inheritance." <sup>128</sup> How could this be best effected? Coomaraswamy is quite explicit in his views regarding this matter, and advocates greater and closer attention to the indigenous languages of the country—i.e., the mother-tongues of the pupils themselves. Even the methods of teaching English had to be completely overhauled. As James Alwis had done earlier, Coomaraswamy has taken as his ideal the development of a fluent bilingualism, in his own words, "an equally intimate knowledge of English and of Ceylonese." Coomaraswamy goes even further than Alwis for he would even go to the extent of making the languages and cultures of England and Sri Lanka compulsory for all school children. These proposals are contained in the following extract from "Education in Ceylon":

Now, the greatest necessities of the present time are the relation of education to the Ceylonese life of today; and the full recognition of our intellectual inheritance. We need to devote more attention to language. ...I would make of English a far more important a study than it is now. Even more neglected are the indigenous and most sweet languages of Ceylon, Sinhalese and Tamil, and all the corresponding culture that goes with them. Using the term Ceylonese to cover both languages and cultures, I would make compulsory in every leaving examination and an essential preliminary to further professional or technical education an equally intimate knowledge of English and of Ceylonese. <sup>129</sup>

On the other hand, under Coomaraswamy's scheme, the compulsory teaching of all other languages except the mother-tongue and English (particularly Greek and Latin) would be abolished, for the very sound reason that such a study would only be dead lumber from the point of view of the pupil, who would never have the chance of proceeding long enough to read and to appreciate the literatures of such dead languages in the original. Once again, as in the case of the teaching of the mother-tongues of the pupils, in proposing the abolition of the teaching of Greek and Latin, Coomaraswamy was not motivated by chauvinistic sentiment but by practical considerations, for he himself had the highest regard for the Western classical languages. Said Coomaraswamy: "I would not have the Greek language taught at all in Ceylon...This is not because I think so little of Greek, but because I think so much of it, and because I think so much of life." <sup>130</sup> In fact, Coomaraswamy was here voicing the conclusions drawn from his own experience of learning Greek.

127. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

128. *Ibid.*

129. *Ibid.*

130. *Ibid.*, p. 187.



Coomaraswamy's own study of Greek never enabled him to read Greek literature in the original, which ultimately led him to the self-realisation that the study of Greek and Latin in Sri Lankan schools could never prove fruitful to a Sri Lankan pupil. Just as James Alwis, having failed as a court interpreter, realised the worthlessness of his English education,<sup>131</sup> here Coomaraswamy confesses candidly the futility of his attempts in school to imbibe the Greek language, its literature and culture:

Let me give you my own experience. I did a certain amount of Greek for London Intermediate Arts and could translate any part of Sophocles' "Electra" a good many years ago. But I cannot now read, much less translate, three words of Greek which I may find in a quotation. I do not think my school Greek affected me at all, in fact, or that I owe anything to it.<sup>132</sup>

And he goes on to declare that whatever knowledge and appreciation of Greek language and literature he acquired later was not the result of his school training in the classics but of his private studies which began much later in adult life, when he was "led thereto by interest, first (in) romantic literature and afterwards in religious philosophy and art."<sup>133</sup>

While Coomaraswamy thus strongly advocated the total abolition of the teaching of Western classical languages in schools, he was agreeable to a compromise: that if the classics were to be retained at all (as an optional subject) their study should be biased not towards the Greek (or Latin) language, especially grammar and literature, but to the "study of Greek culture," and based on such prescribed textbooks as Butcher and Long's "Homer", Gilbert Murray's "Euripides" and "Greek Literature," Jowett's "Plato," Lowes Dickinson's "The Greek View of Life," Miss Harrison's "Prolegomena to Greek Religion," and some good books on Greek art.<sup>134</sup> Again, Coomaraswamy's perspicacity is displayed by the fact that this selfsame proposal—the abandonment of the teaching of Greek and Latin grammar and literature in favour of the study of "Western Classical Culture"—was implemented (though belatedly) in the early 1970s at the University of Sri Lanka when this decision was forced upon the University authorities through weight of circumstances, viz., the scarcity of students wishing to study Greek and Latin at University level and the absence of suitable teachers. According to Coomaraswamy, the best procedure to adopt in gaining an understanding of the fundamental basis of European culture would be to study "Greek Culture" in the manner above outlined, supplemented by an "improved study of English"; English, Coomaraswamy proposed, "should form part of our future education."<sup>135</sup> In fact, Coomaraswamy ridiculed the efforts of contemporary Sri Lankan educators regarding their attempts at teaching Western culture through "a little Greek grammar or the attempt to translate unseen Greek on the part of a few students at the present day."<sup>136</sup> The compromise earlier referred to (i.e., to substitute Greek

131. For the passage from James Alwis which is remarkably parallel to the one from Coomaraswamy here, see James Alwis, *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, 1939, pp. 65-66.

132. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, pp. 187-88.

133. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

134. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

135. *Ibid.*

136. *Ibid.*

culture for Greek language and grammar), Coomaraswamy declared, "is a suggestion I make...with regard to a possible University in the future," a statement which was ironical in its prophetic nature as was proved later as mentioned above: the schools and the University (when it was finally established in 1942) continued to teach Latin and Greek grammar and literature until circumstances compelled the authorities to (belatedly and unwittingly) implement Coomaraswamy's proposal made as far back as 1911.

The last and perhaps most important part of Coomaraswamy's argument for the radical reform of education in Sri Lanka was concerned with University education. The problem of the establishment of a University in Sri Lanka was still fresh in the air during the first decades of the 20th century when Coomaraswamy maintained his closest connections with Sri Lanka, and a University College affiliated to the London University was in fact established in the Island a decade later in 1921. At the time Coomaraswamy wrote and spoke on Sri Lankan education, the majority of the Sri Lankans were clearly in favour of establishing a University in Sri Lanka on the British pattern of Oxford and Cambridge; the bone of contention at the time was not really the "model" to be imitated but a suitable site for the construction of the University buildings. Coomaraswamy was perhaps alone at the time in rejecting *in toto* the London-Oxbridge type of University for Sri Lanka and probably must have aroused guffaws of laughter and raised "educated" and "cultured" eyebrows<sup>137</sup> when he expressed the blasphemous yet candid opinion that "Our University must be above all a school of Oriental learning, sufficient not only for ourselves, but to attract scholars from all parts of the world to learn the wisdom of the East in the East".<sup>138</sup> In other words, Coomaraswamy once again grasped unerringly the issues and implications involved; he saw that a system of "national" education could only be disseminated by a "National University" at its apex, and a national university could not exist without at the same time being a centre of excellence for Oriental learning and culture. One of the gravest limitations (but not the only one) of the London and Cambridge Local Examinations, Coomaraswamy felt, was that there was "no provision whatever...made for the study of the language which is spoken in any of the homes in Ceylon (with the exception of English which is spoken in a few)."<sup>139</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the basic foundation, the bedrock, of a national system of education in Sri Lanka, as adumbrated by Coomaraswamy, would be indigenous traditional culture. However, it would not be a localized and limited, isolated culture, a Sinhalese or even Sri Lankan culture, but a broad Oriental culture which would for the greater part be identical with Indian culture. One of Coomaraswamy's deepest convictions was that Sri Lanka was ethnologically, geographically, linguistically, as well as culturally an integral part of India, not a cultural island adrift in the Indian ocean. This sense of the ultimate unity and identity of Indian and Sri Lankan cultural traditions coloured all

137. Till the middle of the 20th century, perhaps until 1956, students who read subjects related to the Oriental languages, literatures and cultures (Sinhalese, Pali, Sanskrit, Tamil, Buddhist Civilisation, Indian and Ceylon History) were looked down upon socially at the University of Ceylon, and the entire Faculty of Oriental Studies was referred to by the derogatory, often highly contemptuous term, "O-Fac." On the other hand, students who read English, Greek, Latin, Western History, etc. were considered to belong to the "Kultur" set. This position, however, has changed during the last 15 years.

138. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, p. 190.

139. *Ibid.*

Coomaraswamy's opinions and writings on Sri Lanka; and not surprisingly, therefore, for Coomaraswamy, the question of Sri Lankan education could not possibly be discussed in a cultural vacuum. Reiterating his oft-expressed view on this occasion, too, Coomaraswamy declared: "The more I know of Ceylon the more inseparable from India does it appear, and indeed, I regret sometimes that Ceylon and India are not at present under one administration...Further, the more I know of India, the more wonderful and beautiful appear to be her past achievements."<sup>140</sup> In his preface to *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon*, Coomaraswamy said: "Ceylon, from the standpoint of ethnology and culture, is an integral part of India."<sup>141</sup>

Thus Coomaraswamy now explicitly states his next proposal for the re-organization of Sri Lankan education as follows: "If then we would attain the liberty of spirit which is the true end of education, if we would recover our lost character of Orientals, we must turn to India and base our education on Indian ideals."<sup>142</sup> This would be facilitated by making "a third compulsory subject of *Indian Culture* ...It should be studied in translations and studied in historical and descriptive works...I should have then, in our colleges, Professors of Indian Culture—not of any particular language, but men who by their enthusiasm and knowledge would convey to us that understanding of the civilisation of that wonderful country which they themselves possess."<sup>143</sup> Finally, Sanskrit and Pali would be restored to their "place of honour as *par excellence* the classical languages," but these languages would be studied only at the degree and postgraduate levels.<sup>144</sup>

Such were, in essence, the main features of the scheme for the reform of Sri Lankan education that Ananda Coomaraswamy presented to the Sri Lankans towards the end of 1911.<sup>145</sup> Coomaraswamy himself realised that in the contemporary Sri Lankan context, his highly unconventional and radical proposals would amount to a national educational revolution, for he said:

An *educational revolution* as I have outlined, would restore to us our national character, which ought to belong to us and would make us better fitted to enter into and sympathise with the lives of our less literate countrymen in the villages on the one hand, and on the other to hold our own in any more distinguished and learned society where we may ourselves be called upon to take our place.<sup>146</sup>

Coomaraswamy's proposals for educational reform conclude with a reiterated plea for the establishment of a national (yet at the same time cosmopolitan, as shown above) University for Sri Lanka; in the process of doing so, Coomaraswamy indicates the highest possible ideals of academic freedom for any university: "As my last words, I pray you to set before your hearts as an ideal this Ceylon university, where East and West shall meet in one enthusiasm, the

140. *Ibid.*

141. Coomaraswamy, *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon*, p. ix.

142. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, p. 190.

143. *Ibid.*, pp. 191-92.

144. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

145. "Education in Ceylon," the essay printed in *Art and Swadeshi*, is the text of a speech Coomaraswamy made as "Chairman, Annual Ceylon Dinner", in December 1911.

146. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, p. 192.

enthusiasm of those who learn because they want to know, and those who teach because they care so much for what they teach, that they can do nothing else."<sup>147</sup> In these words Coomaraswamy has indeed epitomised everything that has from the time of the establishment of the Ceylon university been mouthed about in a variety of terms such as "academic freedom", "university autonomy," and "contributions to universal knowledge"; it is ironical but true that these ideals have so far often been observed for the greater part in the breach, and need re-statement from time to time by national leaders as was done in the early 20th century by Coomaraswamy.

The trend and eulogistic tone of Coomaraswamy's remarks in an article in the *Ceylon National Review* on the educational system in Denmark clearly indicate that the Danish system came closest to what Coomaraswamy would have termed his ideal system of National Education. The Danish "National" schools, Coomaraswamy noted, were founded on the study of religion and national history, the study of which important subjects lead to a building up of an entire nation of national-minded citizens (Coomaraswamy here sardonically points out that religion and traditional history were the two subjects that were ignored in most Sri Lankan schools at the time). The aims and methods of the Danish system, said Coomaraswamy, were as different from the aims and methods of education in Sri Lanka as light from darkness: "the first and foremost aim (was) to foster a love of country and national feeling...the second aim (was) to educate the people that they may make full use of their free constitution; and the third, to prepare the young to better fit them for the fight for existence, which is daily becoming more acute. To attain these objects the first essential appears to be to develop the personal character and to make the young men and women true and honest Danes."<sup>148</sup> This object is attained through "lectures, giving instructive and interesting examples of the history and teaching the best of the literature of the nation, than anything else."<sup>149</sup> Coomaraswamy emphasised that what had been done in Denmark could also be done in Sri Lanka if the necessary will was forthcoming; such a system of education alone could "restore a common culture and community of interest between all classes and all districts, and something of the old capacity for concerted action" that was part of Coomaraswamy's ideal. Returning to his basic theme, Coomaraswamy once again emphasised that "our real aim must be to educate the people (not a special class alone) *through the medium of their own culture* exactly as is done in Denmark."<sup>150</sup> To Coomaraswamy, culture was the ultimate basis of all education, whether in India, Sri Lanka or anywhere else; "the educational need of India," he declared, "is the development of its people's intelligence through the medium of their national culture."<sup>151</sup> In the contrast that Coomaraswamy draws between the aims and methods of education in Denmark and in Sri Lanka, the distinctly humanitarian, liberal and sometimes socialistic bent of Coomaraswamy's attitudes to education emerges, for he stresses national development and progress through national unity, co-operative and collective endeavour, and also stresses the need for hard labour and a spirit of sacrifice on the part of the total community: progress "cannot

147. *Ibid.*, pp. 192-93.

148. *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 7, August 1908, p. 256.

149. *Ibid.*

150. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

151. *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 2, July 1906, p. 186.

be (attained) without labour and sacrifice of the inconspicuous kind,"<sup>152</sup> said Coomaraswamy, and the primary requirement at the time he felt was "the cultivation of faithfulness and unity amongst ourselves."<sup>153</sup>

Coomaraswamy's educational ideals and ideas were thus (like James Alwis' in the 1860s) in the best humanistic tradition, opposed equally to the narrowly chauvinistic and to the colonialist attitudes. In summary, through his scheme for a system of "National Education" for Sri Lanka Coomaraswamy advocated: (1) the employment of the local languages of the pupils as the principal media of instruction in schools, and their being taught as compulsory subjects; (2) the development of bilingual skills in students (with its necessary corollary, the retention of English as a compulsory auxiliary language and the introduction of better methods of teaching English); (3) the laying of greater emphasis upon the national culture of the pupils, especially on indigenous literature, fine arts and folk arts and crafts; (4) the abolition of the compulsory teaching of Western classical languages (Greek and Latin) and modern non-Ceylonese languages like French; (5) the immediate establishment of a University in Sri Lanka with a heavy bias towards Oriental culture, a University which would ultimately develop into a centre of excellence for Oriental learning and research; (6) the study of Sanskrit and Pali as classical languages at the degree and post-graduate levels at the University; (7) the teaching of Indian Culture as a compulsory subject; (8) the elevation of the status, respectability and dignity of the teaching profession (and the increase of teachers' salaries); and (9) the vesting of all powers of planning and control of education in the hands of the academics themselves, not in those of a governmental bureaucracy (a principle which would automatically promote academic freedom and research). These proposals, taken together, were comprehensive enough to constitute a radical and revolutionary change in the educational system in the early 20th century, had they been implemented. Indeed, they were so far-reaching and ahead of their time that some of Coomaraswamy's proposals were implemented only about fifty or sixty years after they were first enunciated. Some of the suggestions Coomaraswamy made, of course, have yet to be adopted.

As would have become evident from the above discussion, Ananda Coomaraswamy was far ahead of most of his contemporaries, far more radical and progressive as well as realistic in his educational thought. He stands as a key figure in the tradition of radical protest against the system of British colonialist "English education", a tradition in which not only so-called "natives" like James Alwis, Ponnambalam Arunachalam, Ponnambalam Ramanathan, Anagarika Dharmapala and Kumaratunga Munidasa but also non-Ceylonese such as George Turnour, Rev. D. J. Gogerly, A. G. Fraser, F. L. Woodward and Annie Besant wrote in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Coomaraswamy was, in his criticisms of "English education" and his proposals for educational reform, perhaps even more revolutionary than James Alwis' The scope of James Alwis' scheme for educational reform was narrower than that of Ananda Coomaraswamy, for Alwis being a staunch Christian all his life and "anglicised" to a degree which prevented him from understanding as clearly as Coomaraswamy did all the pernicious aspects of contemporary English education and cultural influence, imagined somewhat naively that the use of Sinhalese and Tamil as the media of instruction in place of English, the

152. *The Ceylon National Review*, no. 7, August 1908, p. 259.

153. *Ibid.*

development of bilingualism, changes in school curricula, and the encouragement of Sinhalese literature alone would suffice to bring about a desirable reform in contemporary education. Coomaraswamy's proposals, while stressing the use of the local languages and the development of bilingual skills as did Alwis', were more comprehensive and far-reaching, for Coomaraswamy wished to make *national culture* the basic ingredient of a "national" system of education for Sri Lanka (and India). Also, unlike Alwis, Coomaraswamy paid attention both to secondary as well as to University education, and even concerned himself with the status of teachers, the methods of educational planning, control and management of a national system of education, and the abolition of subjects from the curricula which were ill-fitted for local contemporary needs. Above all, Coomaraswamy's attempts to formulate a "National" policy of education (i.e., an educational policy which would help to preserve the identity of the Sri Lankans as a nation and its social, material and cultural progress) give him a unique place among educational reformers in Sri Lanka and India.

As in the case of James Alwis in the late 1860s, the British colonial authorities appear to have chosen largely to ignore Coomaraswamy's pleas for a change in attitude and policy regarding English education in Sri Lanka. It should be remembered, however, that Coomaraswamy's major critique of Sri Lankan education and his proposed scheme for its reform took the form not of a book or a published article, but of a lecture delivered outside Sri Lanka (the speech was made as "Chrirman, Annual Ceylon Dinner", in December 1911 in London) and published probably much later<sup>154</sup> in India by Ganesh and Co., Madras. Moreover, Coomaraswamy's other references to and criticisms of English education in Sri Lanka lie scattered in his writings on other (and often quite unrelated) topics, and may have at the time appeared to have only been incidental (as in his derogatory references to English education in his prefatory comments to *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*). Unfortunately, as pointed out earlier, Coomaraswamy never systematised or formalised his own criticisms on contemporary education in any single book or article, which perhaps enabled the educational authorities (if they were at all conversant with Coomaraswamy's views on English education) to ignore, (or to pretend to be ignorant of) the ideas and attitudes of an intellectual of Coomaraswamy's calibre on such a highly topical matter of public importance. Clearly, also, from the point of view of the British authorities, the persisting popular clamour for English education more than counter-balanced the effect, if any, of the objections to the system by intellectuals like James Alwis and Coomaraswamy, however scholarly and influential they were considered to be.

Although the British colonial authorities thus appear to have turned a deaf ear to Coomaraswamy's numerous and highly eloquent pleas for a change in the *status quo* in contemporary education, Coomaraswamy's contemporaries in Sri Lanka, mainly the middle class intelligentsia, supported, reiterated, and enlarged upon the views Coomaraswamy had so eloquently advanced between 1906 and 1911; those who took up the cry, principally the members of the Ceylon Social Reform Society of which Coomaraswamy was the founder-president, wrote a series of articles in the *Ceylon National Review* (the organ of the society) on contemporary education and the pressing need for the use of the swabasha as the media of instruction, denationalisation as a result of the use of English

154. *Art and Swadeshi*, in which the essay was published, unfortunately does not indicate its year of publication.

in schools, and so on.<sup>155</sup> Coomaraswamy had perhaps his greatest supporter in his own cousin, Ponnambalam Arunachalam, whose writings on education contain not only many ideas and sentiments expressed earlier by Coomaraswamy, but even a diction and a phraseology which show the obvious influence of Coomaraswamy's criticisms and ideals of education in colonial Sri Lanka. Needless to mention, almost every other critic of English education in Sri Lanka who followed in the tradition of radical protest against colonial education including Anagarika Dharmapala and Munidasa Kumaratunga was clearly indebted to Coomaraswamy.

The present discussion of the educational ideas and ideals of Ananda Coomaraswamy leads one to the conclusion that he was not only firmly rooted in the tradition of radical protest against colonial education in Sri Lanka and in India (a tradition in which James Alwis wrote in the 1860s), but also that he further developed or extended the tradition in a more radical, revolutionary and at the same time practical and specific direction than before. Both Alwis and Coomaraswamy were moved by the same "nationalistic" feeling, a feeling which was perhaps an organic feature of the late 19th and early 20th century nationalist movement—they were both important participants in a resurgence which (though unperceived at the beginning, at the time James Alwis wrote) was to draw within its bounds not only the two of them, but also many others (who are termed "nationalist" leaders in conventional accounts of Sri Lankan nationalism) including Ponnambalam Arunachalam, Ponnambalam Ramanathan, Arumuga Navalar, Anagarika Dharmapala, Piyadasa Sirisena and John de Silva. While holding diverse views in other respects, all these nationalist, political or religious leaders and writers spoke in unison in opposing colonial English education and its pernicious product, a product best described in Coomaraswamy's words: "A generation of spiritual bastards...and intellectual pariahs."

In conclusion, the following passage from *The Dance of Shiva* may be quoted as containing in quintessence the basic features of Coomaraswamy's thoughts on and attitudes towards Western education in Sri Lanka and in India: it comes from an essay addressed to Young India: "A single generation of English education suffices to break the threads of tradition and to create a nondescript and superficial being deprived of all roots—a sort of intellectual pariah who does not belong to the East or the West, the past or the future. The greatest danger for India is the loss of her spiritual integrity. Of all Indian problems the educational is the most difficult and most tragic."<sup>156</sup> These comments could be applied not only to colonial India, but also to colonial Sri Lanka in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

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155. For example, F. L. Woodward's "The Advantages of a Knowledge of the Mother Tongue" (*The Ceylon National Review*, No. 2, July 1906) and "The Nation and the Mother Tongue", (*Ibid.*, No. 8, February-June 1909), and A. G. Fraser's "Christian Education in Ceylon" (*Ibid.*, No. 7, August 1908).

156. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*, New York, 1957, pp. 155-56.