

NATARAJA

Dance of Shiva & Anand K Coomaraswamy

BY JAYANT SAHASRABUDHE

Statue of Nataraja, dancing Shiva at CERN

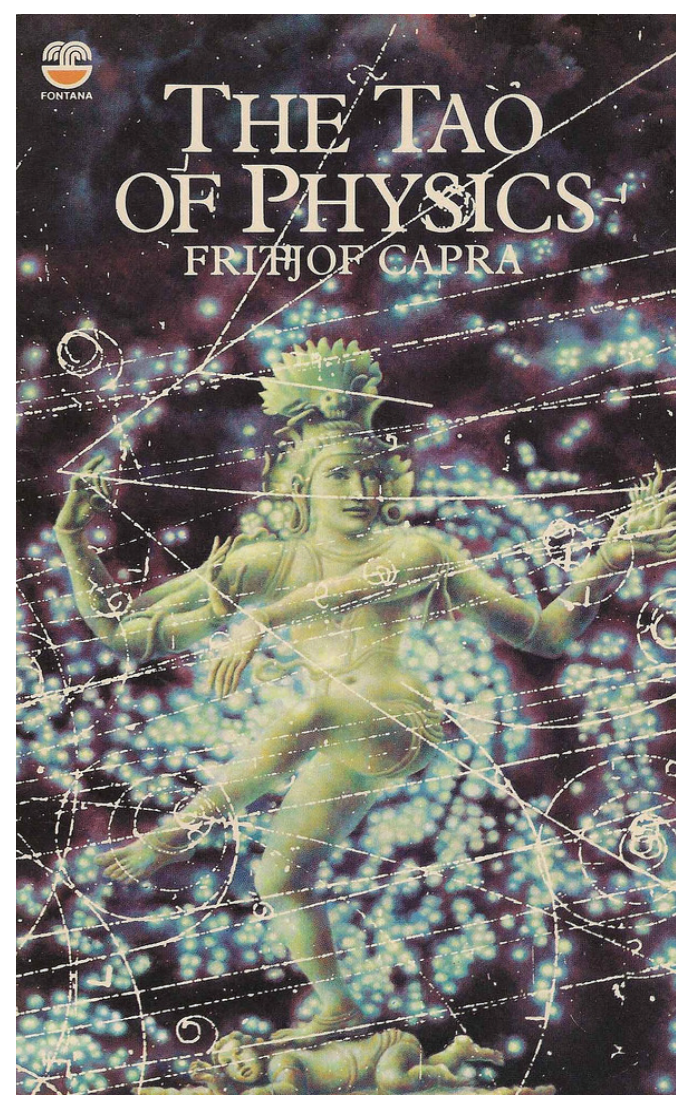
In the annals of science, 18 June 2004 is an important date especially with reference to India. The Government of India had presented CERN (The European Organization for Nuclear Research) at Geneva, Switzerland, with a statue of **Nataraja**, the dancing Shiva. This was a memento to celebrate India's association with this prestigious laboratory since 1960.



An idol of Nataraja was presented by Dr Anil Kakodkar, Former Secretary, Department of Atomic Energy, Government of India to the CERN Laboratory in Switzerland.

Nataraja but why?

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



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

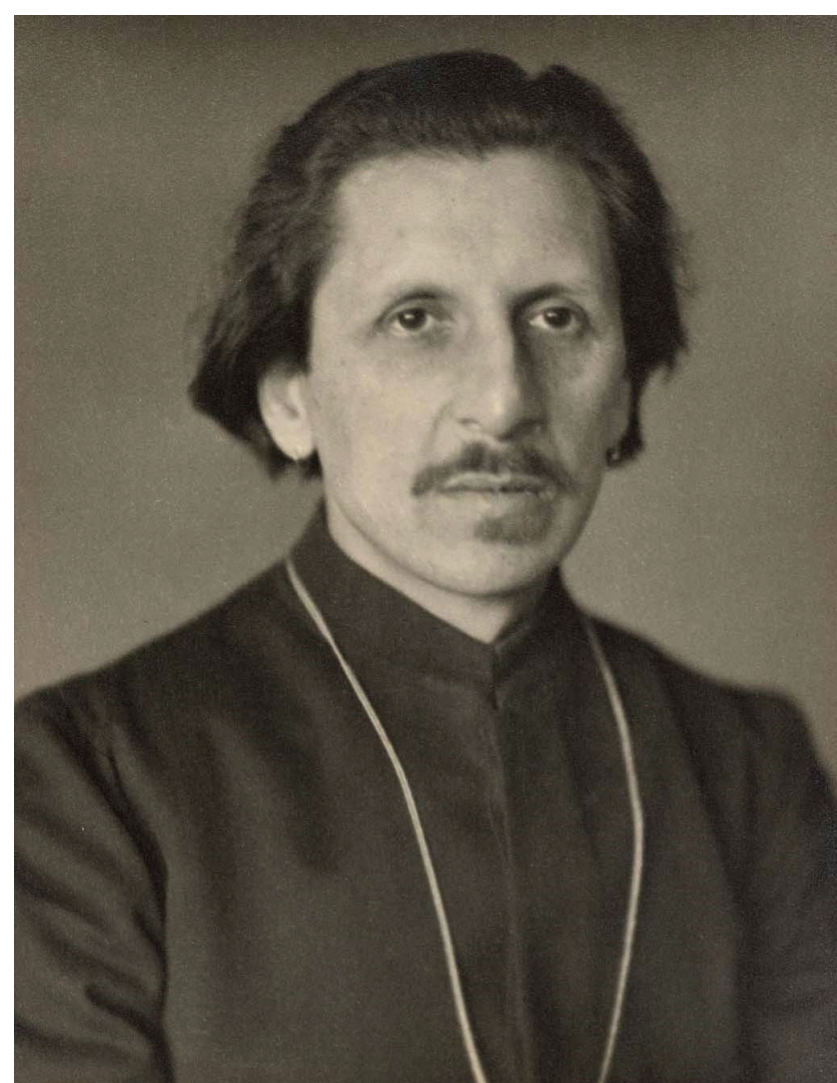
A well-known authority on physical chemistry and Nobel laureate, Ilya Prigogine, who is also known as a poet of thermodynamics, could see the creation and destruction emerging from a common source. For him, **Nataraja** depicts that source which is a perfectly balanced cosmic dance.

Dr VS Ramachandran, one of the leading neuroscientists of this age, while expounding the idea of neuroaesthetics, too cites how remarkable is the bronze sculpture of **Nataraja**. Sir Jacob Epstein, one of the pioneers of modern sculpture also says, "Shiva dances, creating the world and destroying it, his large rhythms conjure up vast aeons (aeons mean a period of one thousand million years) of time, and his movements have a relentless magical power of incantation. Our European allegories are banal and pointless by comparison with these profound works, devoid of the trappings of symbolism, concentrating on the essential, and the essentially plastic."

The list of luminaries who have been intrigued by **Nataraja** is long and unending. The essence of this dance form of Shiva has perfectly captured the modern-day intelligent minds. The Government of India acknowledged it as well and made a serious effort to spread the profound meaning of the metaphor related to this dance of Shiva to the modern world. Through CERN, it has unraveled the importance of the Dance of Shiva, the **Nataraja**. In this context, next to the **Nataraja**'s statue one finds an interesting plaque dedicated to pioneering historian and philosopher of Indian art, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, popularly known as Ananda Coomaraswamy.

Ananda Coomaraswamy – a seer's definition of the Nataraja

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



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

Coomaraswamy was born in the erstwhile Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka) on 22 August 1877, to Muttu Coomaraswamy, a learned and brilliant Tamil lawyer

and his British wife, Elizabeth Beeby. Named Ananda, he lost his father at a very early age of two. He was then taken to England by his mother. She imparted basic Hindu values of life to little Ananda, thus, shaping and filling his mind with sublime reverence, rightful pride for his own history, heritage and culture. Coomaraswamy studied geology and botany at the University of London and later, returned to Ceylon to serve the Geological Survey of Ceylon. As a geologist, he was credited with the discovery of 'Thorionate' and received a doctorate in science. During

his geological surveys, Coomaraswamy became acquainted with local traditions, art, sculpture, culture, and heritage. These intrigued his mind and intellect, and that is when he was subsumed by their study in detail. At the same time, he was deeply affected by the adverse impact of British education on his fellow citizens. It pained him so much that he plunged himself into correcting these wrongs. This, in turn, transformed an accomplished geologist into a pioneer historian of Indian art and a foremost interpreter of Indian culture to the West. (ref: Encyclopedia Britannica).

Coomaraswamy writes extensively about varied aspects of Indian art, culture, and heritage highlighting their profound significance on the modern era. His most celebrated and most sought-after book **The Dance of Shiva** was published in 1918. This 100-year old book is still relevant and well-read worldwide today. It is a collection of fourteen essays. In his first essay titled: **What has India contributed to human welfare?** he indicates the fundamentals of Indian culture. While cautioning Indians about losing these fundamental elements he writes, "The essential contribution of India, then, is simply her Indianness; her great humiliation would be to substitute or to have substituted for this own character (*svabhava*) a cosmopolitan veneer, for then indeed she must come before the world empty-handed. The heart and essence of the Indian experience are to be found in a constant intuition of the unity of all life, and the instinctive and ineradicable conviction that the recognition of this unity is the highest good and the uttermost freedom."

Later, Coomaraswamy takes on the Western thinkers who disparaged the Indian art in an essay titled **Indian Images with Many Arms**. Here, he explains the underlying meaning of such forms of deities tearing apart the faulty logic of Western scholarship. The masterpiece amongst these essays is the one titled **The Dance of Shiva**, which touches the chords of innumerable minds, and fascinates the hearts even today. An excerpt:

synthesis of science, religion, and art. How amazing is the range of thought and beauty of these artists who first to the great end such a type as this, affording an image of reality, a key to the complex tissue of life, a theory of nature, not merely satisfactory to a single clique or race, nor acceptable to the thinkers of one century only, but universal in its appeal to the philosopher, the lover, and the artists all ages and all countries. How supremely great in power and grace this dancing image must appear to all those who've striven in plastic forms to give expression to their intuition of Life ...

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

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

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



In 2002, James Crouch published **A Bibliography of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy**, an enthralling read of 430 pages. Crouch says that this book documents the remarkably productive career of one of the great minds of the twentieth century. Fortunately, his painstaking endeavors did bear fruits of diligence before his own eyes as he could see the changing minds of contemporary critics. People now, around the world have started appreciating Indian art and culture. Indian images, symbols, icons are getting new-age interpretations referred to as 'Modern Thought'. Coomaraswamy, thus, earns a well-deserved applause for this change.

Ananda K Coomaraswamy retired as a curator of Indian and Oriental Art at the Boston Museum in the US on 22 August 1947, at the age of 70. He had planned to return to India and take a plunge into spiritual life. He wanted to become a *sanyasi* so that he could tread the path of renunciation. However, this was not going to happen. Suddenly on 9 September 1947, while working on a new edition of **The Dance of Shiva**, he passed away. Fortunately, by then his beloved India had become independent.

What a fascinating saga isn't it!



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