
THE PERFECT WINDOW

Speech at the Gratiaen Award-Giving Function on 4 April 2001

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Nature has used India as an oyster clasp for its genetics. A pearl of the rarest refraction has emerged from the bi-valve of mind and matter, as Sri Lanka. India's spirit no less than its seed, ethos no less than ethnicity have quickened life on this isle. Sri Lanka is, to wit, India miniaturized. And yet, within its sub-continental gestation, this *dvipa* has acquired a hue all its own, a glint that stands apart from its originations.

Sri Lanka derives from India but is not of it; she owes to India but belongs only to herself. If history has vouchsafed her exclusivity, geography has validated it but after – almost – changing its mind. Consider the Palk Straits, which set off Sri Lanka from the Indian coastline. A series of shy islets between Talai Mannar and Dhanushkodi hyphenate that sliver of sea. They hyphenate, neither joining up nor staying apart. They are an elliptical bridge of sand-discs strung on a filament chain of salt, where it requires expertise to say this one, here, is India's and this one, Sri Lanka's. I can imagine two children, a boy called Geo and a girl, Polity, playing hopscotch on these islets, neither winning nor losing. Just playing, their little heads tousled by the saline wind.

Salinity is sharp. Salt-water divides and creates more decisively than any other substance in nature. The sea, be it ever so narrow, ever so superficial, sunders continuity and nature. So that this side of the brine becomes mine and the other, thine. And not just this land-side, this shore, but even this stretch of sea – this ceases to be mine, becomes yours. Tuna move unblinkingly from one territorial water to another; prawn trespass. But they are tuna, prawn. They are free to do so. Not so the fishers of tuna, prawn. And they – the fishers – are netted. By Immigration.

Near can be far. 'Here' in a trice, can become 'there.'

India and Sri Lanka, as coastal states, know that sovereignty can end or begin with a fish's fin.

Monkfish Moon could never have been written in India. But nowhere can it be understood better than in India. Understood under the skin. *Funny Boy* could not have been written in India, for it tells of a Lankan tale, but India does understand why "Ammachi (in Jaffna) phoned Nages Aunty to find out if it was safe to send Radha Aunty by train. And Nages Aunty said that the tension had died down and that she had arranged for a police friend of hers to escort Radha aunty to the station (to take the train that would take her to Colombo)." Nowhere other than on the sub-continent of India can one understand in our very beings the hazards that train

journeys can entail. Train journeys, that is, from one ethnocentricity to another. Both in India and in Sri Lanka, the longer, overnight-type of journeys are journeys from one major ethnic ambience to another. Majorly different, to employ a word disallowed in grammar, yet majorly linked ambiances.

"Ceylon" wrote Ananda Coomaraswamy "Is a more perfect window to gaze on India's past than can be found in India itself." He is right. The question arises: Is Sri Lanka, the window to India's past, also frozen in the same past? Or is it a window to gaze on India's present and India's future, a window that is keeping time with the transformations in the subject of its gaze? Is the window learning, unlearning, borrowing without inhibition, discarding without regret? Or is it a painting of Still Life, fixated on some one image of India?

There are those who would like to freeze India and Sri Lanka in the time warps of their preference. I have found with more irritation than surprise the following account in a 1996 British publication dealing with literature on the Indian sub-continent. Writing on "the first historic settlements" in Sri Lanka it says: "These settlers came from India, and were composed of Sinhalese from north India, speaking an Indo-Aryan language and Tamils from South India speaking a Dravidian language." Doubtless the writer thinks they came on an upper and lower deck of the same ark, one marked "North Indians headed for Southern Ceylon" and the other "South Indians headed for Northern Ceylon." Who is to explain to these simple labellers of the world's population that even in that remote antiquity those who moved out of India were unrecognizably interbred even before the Tamil queens at Polonnaruwa and the Nayakkar kings of Kandy contributed to the ethnic toss-up of the genetic dice in this *dvipa*, so that a 'throw' can land on any one of the DNA's multiple faces?

India is a civilization of many constants and many more variables; which is why it is perennial. 'Only that which moves, stays.'

Barring some prismatists, most Lankans know that their window gaze of India is, essentially, the gaze of one dynamic pluralism at another. Likewise, barring some incorrigible ethnicists, most Indians know the diversity of their component parts to be part of a mosaic, which is, in turn, fascinating, bewildering, exasperating, traumatizing but which is always – India, greater than the sum of its parts. Like pieces in a kaleidoscope, forming new patterns with each turn of Time's hand – new patterns that yet remain, each in itself, the same. So that when an earthquake brings a part of India

down, something survives the rubble, something vital, something deathless. Deathless not just because it is a billion plus strong, but because it is – India. A torment to the dividers-up of the world into neat blocs, a nightmare to colonialists and post-colonialists unlike, an impossibility to all categorizers, north-south *wallas*, second-world-third-world types, an oxymoron for segregationists, integrationists, congregationists, India is a delight, a joy and a rapture for the higher human sensibility. Also, of course, ever so often, a cause for lamentation, sorrow and, always, for contemplation.

Such is India. A house of laughter and of pain, of remorse and of self-confidence, of memory, and of dreams. But a house that is itself.

The literatures of India or Sri Lanka as, for that matter, of the whole sub-continent bear a family resemblance; they cannot but since they are true to themselves. Tagore, Iqbal, Nazrul Islam, Bharati and Ananda Samarakoon have created national – as opposed to nationalist – verse of the same timbre. Yet Bengali, Urdu, Tamil and Sinhala retain – thank God – their individualities. Likewise, Vikram Seth and Michael Ondaatje when writing, albeit in English about India's and Sri Lanka, write about the same chapter of life in which we, South Asians, have been sited.

Coomaraswamy has written, "India without Ceylon is incomplete." The geopolitical Indian in me was a little startled to read that line. I read it again. Yes, it was put in exactly those words. "India without Ceylon is incomplete." What could Coomaraswamy who has also spoken of Ceylon as a perfect window to gaze on India's past, I wondered, have meant by that line – "India without Ceylon is incomplete?" And after a while of contemplation, I understood; I understood it perfectly. Just as the different components of India, remaining distinct, go to complete India, so also in the dimension of India's non-territorial culture, its impirium of human pluralism, does Sri Lanka complete India.

Sri Lanka is not a post-script or an epilogue to the *Tractatus Indica*. It is the epigram that encapsulates the epic. It is the pith, the quintessence, the quintus, the *fifth*, that concludes and completes

the proverbial 'four essences' which form and pervade the culture of India.

Not for nothing is Sri Lanka the perfect window because if it is a window that sees it is also one that can show up. Equally, it is a window that can see and imbibe.

Sri Lanka cannot forget India in her thoughts and writings because she cannot forget her derivations. She cannot ignore India, for she cannot ignore diversities. She cannot forsake India for she cannot forsake her destiny. India and Sri Lanka recognize themselves in one another. We see in the other the prides and prejudices we know, and the littlenesses that often mar our daily lives. Equally, we see our humanity, our keenness of mind, our largeness of heart.

We have, I am afraid, no way of forgetting what we have not relished. But perhaps we can remember without recrimination. We have, I am afraid, no way of repaying what we have borrowed. But perhaps we can lend without arrogance and borrow without feeling crushed by the debt, for do we not know that each loan between peoples has come from a borrowing? And let us remember, in the umbilism of the Palk Straits, we are all-but linked, all-but-the-same. Thank God, too, that Geo and Polity can hopscotch under shared, mellow sun, rather than squabble at the solstice of competitive arrogance.

May something in us never grow out of innocence into the venality of modern adulthood. Let the world worship globalization and wire-connected globalism. Let us celebrate something akin but also fundamentally different: let us celebrate internationalism which, in the words of Coomaraswamy, "is the recognition of the rights of others to their self-development and of the incompleteness of the civilized world if their special culture-contribution is missing."

And may the literatures of Sri Lanka – English, Sinhala, Tamil – which we celebrate today, with the help of Michael Ondaatje's endowment, help Sri Lanka, the "perfect window," to gaze at India's past, present and future, and in doing so, see not just its mould but its soul-mate.

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