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# CONTRIBUTION OF O.C. GANGOLY AND S.K. SARASWATI TO THE *JOURNAL OF THE GREATER INDIA SOCIETY: A STUDY*

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**Abstract:** *The idea of Greater India became popular in the twentieth century nationalist environment in which ancient India's 'glorious' impact was traced in the neighbouring Asian especially the South East Asian regions. The scholars believed that the all-inclusive impact of Indian culture led those regions to be transformed into India's 'cultural colonies'. These scholars conducted extensive research in socio-cultural aspects, religion, art, political features etc. to show such deep influence of India. In this endeavour, the Journal of the Greater India Society provided a crucial platform for the scholarly investigations and helped in spreading the ideology. In this article I have tried to discuss about the essays of two eminent art historians - O.C. Gangoly and S.K. Saraswati which were published in the journal. The study tries to trace their perspective and wants to examine how far the familiar structural analysis about Greater India was present in their writings. This is significantly related with the evaluation of their approach, an effort to understand whether the writers allowed any space to the role of the local elements in their discussions about the artistic development of different South-East Asian nations or whether they viewed them as completely 'Indianised'.*

**Keywords:** *Greater India, Journal of the Greater India Society, Indian influence, South-East Asian art, indigenous characters, O.C Gangoly, S.K. Saraswati.*

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The *Journal of the Greater India Society* was published from 1934 to 59, with an interruption from 1947-54. The editors of this journal were

U.N. Ghoshal, Kalidas Nag and Nalinaksha Dutt. This journal was associated with the Kolkata based Greater India Society or *Brihattara Bharat*

*Parishad* which was established in 1926. (The Inaugural Report of the Greater India Society: 1926: 3). The society was dedicated to the research of the idea of Greater India which focused on the extensive and all-inclusive impact of Indian culture over the neighbouring Asian nations. Such deep impact or in other words, the spread of Indian culture in its totality, as this genre of study claimed, made those far away regions an extended cultural part of the Indian subcontinent. Thus, the study initiated the search for India's culture beyond her geographical limitations. The Greater India research received its impetus from the contemporary period of increasing nationalist consciousness. This context introduced a significant nationalist discourse that hailed the greatness of ancient Indian culture and civilization by refuting the negative criticisms offered by the imperialist administrators and scholars.

On the other hand, the nationalist urge got combined with the consciousness of Asian unity and India was being regarded not only as a part of the vast Asiatic culture, but mainly as the source of the unique Asiatic spirituality, viewed as much superior to the imperialistic and materialistic West (Bharucha: 2006, Hay: 1970). It was claimed, India could provide an efficient leadership to the fellow Asian nations in their struggle against imperialism just like she guided them towards the road of civilization in the past days (Levi: 1954, Prasad: 1979, Keenleyside: 1982). The theory of Greater India was contextualized in this background of cultural nationalism which tried to ignite the nationalist sentiment of the common people by upholding the past glory of the country. India possessed a dynamic yet humanist, peaceful and universal approach towards her neighbours. It was claimed, the superior qualities of her culture inspired local people of various Asian nations to accept them with all the features and thus, the indigenous cultures evolved into more developed and civilized forms.

This genre of study tried to explore different Asian regions to establish the aspect of the Indian influence in those places. The present paper is

mainly concentrated on the South-East Asian nations, and the present discussion encompasses those writings which have examined various architectural and sculptural features of different South-East Asian countries like Borneo, Java and Burma. These were written by two famous art historians Ordhendra Coomar Gangoly and Sarasi Kumar Saraswati who had introduced a new chapter in the study of art history through their calibre, meticulous research and analytical, inquisitive approach. In this context it should be mentioned that the idea of Greater India undeniably provided a significant and distinct approach towards the study of South-East Asia which began to be popularised during and after the Second World War. South-East Asia as a distinct region with its own characteristics attracted the researchers (Fifield:1976, Hall:1955, Hall:1961, Tarling:1999). However, role of the foreign influence versus the indigenous factors in forming the cultural attributions became a subject of debate among the scholars (Manguin: 2011, Tarling: 1999). Influence of India and China was given importance with the discoveries of archaeological evidence. The nationalist scholars from India did not miss the opportunity. Taking help from the earlier and ongoing research and excavations, they started to highlight ancient India's glorified contribution towards those regions. They argued about the total absorption of Indian influence and transformation of those receiving areas into India's 'cultural colonies'. This imagery was a familiar characteristic of the Greater India studies. The Greater India Society was founded to fulfil this objective of spreading the words about the idea of *Brihattara Bharata*. Detailed discussion about the aims of the society was published in their Journal which emphasised on restoring the history of ancient India's cultural influences over foreign regions and to explore the ways to fulfil this agenda. Their initiatives included the publication of research papers, books, organising seminars and lectures etc. (The Inaugural Report of the Greater India Society: 1926). In other words, means which could be helpful to create

awareness among people about the objectives of the Society and about the necessity of the Greater India study in contemporary period. The publication of the Journal by the Society appeared to be an important instrument in achieving their mission.

The journal contained writings of eminent scholars like Kalidas Nag, Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, Nihar Ranjan Ray, Himansu Bhusan Sarkar, Bijan Raj Chatterjee, Nilakanta Sastri, O.C. Ganguly, Debaprasad Ghosh etc. Through their essays, writers engaged in discussing about many facets of this idea, for example, the processes and agencies responsible behind the spread of such impact, approach of the local socio-cultural context towards the penetrated foreign culture and, the continuation of those Indian influences even in contemporary times. Apart from the familiar Indian writers, the journal regularly published articles of prominent foreign authors thus maintaining a balanced analytical approach and helping readers to be aware of recent research. In the extracts from the Annual Report of the Greater India Society for the year 1936-37<sup>1</sup> which was published in the journal, it was stated that the committee appreciated the 'high scientific standard' which the journal maintained in the published papers and also the encouragement offered to the co-operation to the Indian and foreign writers in the chosen field<sup>2</sup> Thus the journal was trying to fulfil "a distinct need for the cause of Greater Indian research."<sup>3</sup> The systematic and methodical research focused on various areas of the South-East Asian countries to explore the nature of the relation between so called 'colonial culture' of South-East Asia and the 'parent culture' of India. The discussion of this nature was often related with investigating the degree of Indian influence - how deep and encompassing it was; whether this allowed the local characters to flourish on their own or incorporated within itself thus creating an 'Indianised' art form and, significantly, how far such influence was still visible in the artistic expressions of those nations. Essays of Ganguly and Saraswati published in

the *Journal of the Greater India Society* retained such features that greatly fulfilled the demand of the Greater India studies and fed the nationalist aspiration as well.

### **Ordhendra Coomar Ganguly**

My first discussion centres on the writing of Ordhendra Coomar Ganguly, popularly known as O.C Ganguly. One of the doyens in the study of Indian art, Ganguly had served as the secretary and vice-president of the Indian Society of the Oriental Art for a considerable time and edited its famous illustrated quarterly art journal *Rupam*. The prominent art historian O.C. Ganguly's writing published in the *Journal of the Greater India Society* named 'Relation between Indian and Indonesian Culture' addressed the familiar aspects of the Greater India discourse about defining the 'nature of relation of the so-called colonial culture with its parent stem,' i.e., the relation between the Indian culture and local cultural traits (Ganguly: 1940: 53). But it also added a new perspective to the discussion. Ganguly's writing did not challenge the main traits of the Greater India theory which emphasized on the strong expansion of the Indian influences. Yet he did not judge the cultural traits of the Indonesian regions as 'mere colonised or Indianised or indianesque' (Ganguly: 1940: 67). Here, he stood different from other scholars. However, Ganguly did not deny that in the Indonesian countries Indian culture had been completely absorbed with all its characteristic features, elements, and textures. But he was not ready to call those regions as 'Indianised' places or 'colonies'. According to him, they were not only the 'distant centres' or 'mere reflections' of Indian culture but could be defined as important 'limbs and sources of significant phases of Indian cultural life' (Ganguly: 1940: 56). In Ganguly's words, this became possible because of those capable Indian migrants who were not any 'second rate' men from India but included learned Brahmanas and talented heroic princes who carried Indian cultural traits with them and developed the local culture to an 'equal eminence

with that of the mother-continent', but in a new environment (Gangoly:1940: 53). According to Gangoly, evidence showed that such Indian immigrants maintained the 'values, standards and principles of Indian culture in those lands at a high level of excellence and in some phases outshone the achievements of their original birth-place' (Gangoly: 1940: 56). Gangoly believed, following the Pauranic instance, such places had become '*Karma-bhumi*' of the immigrant Indians (Gangoly: 1940:59). He referred to the Pauranic examples which included the nine additional territories across the Indian ocean as an 'integral part of Bharat-Varsha' (Gangoly 1940: 57-59). The author argued that the *Puranas* attached "an equal sanctity to these component parts of the island-India and they came to be regarded as the strongholds of national Indian culture - where Indians lived, fought, traded, performed their religious duties" and regarded them 'suitable for their cultural activities equal to any part of India proper' (Gangoly:1940: 59). These features, the author believed, created a perfect background for the all-inclusive spread of Indian cultural influence, in his words, 'wholesale transportation of the characteristic features and phases of Indian culture, bag and baggage.' (Gangoly: 1940: 58-59)

The word 'transportation' echoes the idea of 'transplantation' of Indian culture or 'Indianisation' which was frequently present in the writings of Ramesh Chandra Majumdar. Through this, he argued about the encompassing spread of Indian culture. To him, these places were the extended part of Indian cultural areas instead of 'Indianised' regions. But his perspective was not very different. A difference between 'influence' and 'transportation' should be cleared in this context. Whenever an immigrant culture tries to influence, the host society has the liberty to choose from the foreign traits according to its wishes and suitability. But when the author uses the term 'transportation' or 'transplantation', his approach may not be the same. Transportation of culture indicates the spread of culture in its

entirety. Such situation becomes possible when the host society is ready to accept all aspects of penetrated culture, without being able to make own choices. This can also be, in another sense, an imposition of culture. However, the Greater India theorists did not intend to mean that. The theory of Greater India clearly showed the writers' emphasis over the total absorption of the Indian culture by the South-East Asian countries. This was a peaceful and spontaneous acceptance by the local population, not a forceful imposition. But the question remains, how far the writers acknowledged the indigenous elements' contribution in creating the cultural identity. The scholars eulogised the Indian culture as great and superior while the indigenous culture of South-East Asia appeared to them filled with inferior qualities. Even a historian like Ramesh Chandra Majumdar has used the term "barbarous" in this respect (Majumdar 1940). According to this view, the incapability of the 'inferior' indigenous culture of South-East Asians to interact or assimilate with the Indian cultural traits led them to accept the immigrant culture in its totality.

Thus, these historians might have used different nomenclatures like "transportation" or "transplantation" to describe the spread of Indian culture, but their fundamental belief remained same. It should be mentioned that Bijan Raj Chatterjee, an eminent contributor to the Greater India studies, did not agree with the idea of 'colony' to define the South-East Asian regions influenced by Indian culture. Because, he believed, the term colony primarily signified the establishment of political control, which the ancient Indians did not do in South-East Asia. Instead, he preferred to use the term 'Indianised states' or in other words, countries that came under the influence of the Indian subcontinent (Chatterjee:1965: vii). As the expansion of Indian impact in the South-East Asian nations was devoid of the nature of political imposition and achieved by a peaceful cultural interaction, so he thought, such a term should not be in use which denoted an altogether different explanation of the process.

He offered an alternative definition to explain the character of this Indian impact-‘cultural influence without political influence’. (Chatterjee: 1965: 15). O.C. Ganguly also hesitated to delineate such places as ‘colonies’. However, he refrained to follow any political aspect like Chatterjee. On the contrary, Ganguly believed that the South-East Asian regions became integral cultural parts of the Indian subcontinent in a new geographical environment. So, in both cases the historians were reluctant to describe those distant places as so-called Indian ‘colonies’ that generally other Greater India scholars did. But that did not mean that they were voicing for the autonomous role of the indigenous characters of such places. Instead, the approach towards the all-inclusive impact of Indian culture was very much evident in their writings. Choice of words varied according to the writers’ personal preferences which reflected their own perspectives and thoughts.

According to Ganguly, Indonesian literature, architecture etc. followed the Indian ideals and achieved the ‘utmost perfection.’ (Ganguly: 1940: 68) He of course accepted that certain ‘new forms and types’ evolved in the ‘sculptural representations’ (Ganguly:1940: 68). But simultaneously urged that these aspects were adhering to the Indian principles and were nothing but a ‘few exceptions.’ (Ganguly:1940:68). There were no features in the architecture and sculpture of Indonesia which could not be explained in terms of the Indian conventions. Ganguly in fact applied the terms like ‘Indian architecture’, ‘Indian sculpture’ and ‘Indian art’ while describing the Indonesian artistic achievements (Ganguly 1940: 68). In his writing, art, culture and civilization of South-East Asian countries had been frequently indicated as ‘art, culture and civilization of India’ because they were the ‘natural developments and applications of Indian creations by Indian hands in new conditions.’ (Ganguly: 1940: 68). The question is whether Ganguly altogether denied the possibility of the intrusion of indigenous characters here. Being an art critic, perhaps this was not possible for him.

But he saw the presence of local artistic characters as exceptional cases. Clearly, Ganguly retained the approach of the Greater India studies which saw the basic and general character of the South-East Asian architecture and sculpture as Indian. This approach and his own proposition about the ‘transportation of culture’ were contentious of his idea of not using the term ‘colony’. Ganguly’s faith in the ‘development of essentially Indian forms in a new environment’ (Ganguly: 1940: 68) supported the idea of ‘cultural colonization’.

In a previous article named ‘On Some Hindu Relics in Borneo’ O.C. Ganguly followed a similar approach (Ganguly: 1936). Ganguly’s search for the influence of the Indian art in Borneo led him to use various discovered images as evidence like standing *Mahakala*, seated *Ganesha*, broken head of *Brahma* etc. (Ganguly:1936). Moreover, through line drawings he showed that the two types of *Nandi* images i.e., *Nandi* with head erect and *Nandi* with drooping heads were reminiscent of the *Nandis* of the Mid-Chola period and the later productions reflected gradual degeneration (Ganguly: 1936: 100-1). The author suggested for a possibility that Borneo might have received the Indian influence through Java where these two types of *Nandi* images had also been found (Ganguly: 1936: 102). But he was not very much confident about this assumption as at the end of the article, Ganguly showed that the *Puranas* suggested that Borneo’s connection with India was much older than her contact with Java (Ganguly:1936: 103). Noticeably, the possibility of inclusion of local Javanese features had not been thought of though the interaction between two regions had been clearly suggested, either early or at a later period. Nevertheless, we should not forget that there was an absence of enough reliable data, yet Ganguly’s effort to establish his assumptions with the help of iconography was praiseworthy and undoubtedly reflected his keen sense of historical perspective and expertise in the field.

### **Sarasi Kumar Saraswati**

Sarasi Kumar Saraswati was a distinguished historian in the field of art and architecture.

His noteworthy contributions to the study of early Indian fine arts, especially sculpture, iconography and architecture provide readers a critical survey of various facets in these fields. Saraswati produced a significant study of the famous Paharpur temple in North Bengal and identified the influence it had left on the temple at Pagan, Myanmar (Burma). His article 'Temples of Pagan' published in the *Journal of the Greater India Society* in 1942 shows his in-depth research in this subject (Saraswati:1942). It offered a vivid discussion about the temples of Pagan in Burma and tried to locate their origins (Saraswati:1942: 28). Saraswati was astonished by the presence of innumerable temples in Pagan and hailed the place as the home of numerous monuments. However, his discussion focused mainly on the study of those temples which survived the ravages of time and were admired by the scholars and visitors for their beauty and uniqueness. The author should be credited here for his wonderful scholarly approach and an easy yet elegant style that enabled readers to have a thorough understanding of those monuments.

Saraswati divided the temples of Pagan into three groups. The distinction was mainly based on the detailed features of the temples. But he also tried to trace a common tradition, conception and style among them. Saraswati described these commonalities as "Indo-Burmese" (Saraswati: 1942: 7). Perhaps he was trying to indicate a possible emergence of an assimilated style, evolved from the interaction between the architectural styles of India and Burma. But the question is how far such assimilative aspect is really acknowledged in his writings? Or does it reflect familiar contradictory aspects of the Greater India studies?

The answer lies in the writer's effort to trace India's role as a significant source of the artistic attributions of the Pagan region. For example, Saraswati tried to highlight India's contribution in developing the architectural styles of the temples. In the first place he disagreed with Fergusson who had traced the origin of the Burmese temples

to Babylonia (Saraswati: 1942: 23). Saraswati agreed that at first sight, the Burmese temples presented 'remarkable dissimilarities' with those of India. But he insisted that 'it would be a more probable explanation to think that such architectural styles and monuments might have existed in the great Gangetic cities but perished due to weather and vandalism.' (Saraswati: 1942: 23). Thus, Saraswati emphasised the role of Northern India in this process. He also rejected the views of Duroiselle who, at first ascribed the origin of the Pagan temples to North India, but later changed his opinion saying that the temples were 'fashioned after South Indian models.' (Saraswati: 1942: 24) Saraswati accepted that temples like the Thatbinyu temple, Gawaduwpalin temple, Sulaimani temple etc. had some similarities with the South Indian architecture (Saraswati: 1942: 24). However, he believed, such similarities were accidental as there were fundamental differences in general conception, planning, design and layout of the storeys of the Pagan monuments (Saraswati: 1942: 24). The writer also questioned Wales' view where he regarded the Ananda temple as a 'South Indian temple crowned by a North Indian *sikhara*.' (Saraswati: 1942: 24). According to him, here the storied arrangement, which might be regarded as the only influence of South India, was not present. Instead, he emphasised, the 'typical curvilinear spire as the crowning element of the whole superstructure suggested North India as the country' from where possibly the style had been derived (Saraswati: 1942: 24). Thus, Saraswati's arguments on one hand, made readers familiar with the contemporary discussions and debates about the related subject, on the other hand, they clearly showed his opinion regarding India, specifically North India, as a significant source of inspiration for the Pagan temples.

Further studies would make it clear that the role of Eastern India had not been ignored either. To be precise, Saraswati emphasized more on the role of Eastern India as the source of the architectural and sculptural characteristics of Pagan. He focused on several terracotta

votive tablets and stone sculptures that had been excavated from Pagan and Old Prome. These exhibited the representation of a particular type of temple 'having a roof of several receding tiers crowned by a high curvilinear spire of North Indian type and with a *stupa* as its finial.' (Saraswati: 1942: 25). Similar types of temple representation could also be found in the illustrations of several sculptures of Bengal and in a painted sketch of a temple of Buddha found from North Bengal. Keeping in mind such evidence, Saraswati proposed that there was an active contact between this region and Burma (Saraswati: 1942: 25). He suggested that this specific type of temples seen in Pagan might have derived their influence from Bengal or Eastern India. He pointed to the similarities between the temples of Paharpur and Pagan. From systematic excavations at Paharpur, fragmentary evidence of temples had been found. Saraswati reiterated that the imitation of these temples could be seen in the miniature paintings and sculptures of West Bengal (Saraswati: 1942: 27). He also gathered enough evidence that sufficiently demonstrated the similarities between *Paharpur* temple type and that of the Pagan.

However, despite accepting the Indian inspiration for the Ananda temple of Pagan, Saraswati did not support Duroiselle that it was planned and built by Indian architects and that it was practically an Indian temple. Saraswati believed that 'the resemblances between the Pagan and the Paharpur temples were mainly in exterior elevation.' (Saraswati: 1940: 26). There were no similarities between their 'ground plan, interior arrangements and original lay out (Saraswati: 1942: 27). However, Saraswati gave preferences to the resemblances over such dissimilarities and asserted that Indian temples played a major inspirational role for the Burmese monuments. Actually, a scope of assimilation has been accepted and the author insisted that 'some of the features had undoubtedly derived from the Indian prototypes.' (Saraswati 1942: 28). But he also argued, there were some distinct characteristics which indicated towards the 'coordination into a

single and well-balanced whole' and this had been possible due to the 'genius of the local craftsmen.' (Saraswati 1942: 28). Based on the similarities, he traced the style of the Pagan temples to North East India, but insisted that they also had their own characteristics which were distinct, 'apart' and 'unknown to India' (Saraswati: 1942: 28). Saraswati thus differed from his fellow scholars. While emphasising on the aspect of Indian influence, he acknowledged the active role played by indigenous elements contributing to the creation of their own art tradition. His writings thus presented Sarasi Kumar's efficiency as a specialist in the history of architecture, his profound scholarship of sculpture and critical treatment of the empirical details.

Thus, from the above discussion it is evident that there was a general tendency of the writers to focus upon the aspects of Indian influence in South East Asia while ignoring local elements. Through publication of such essays, undeniably, the *Journal of the Greater India Society* tried to achieve its major objective i.e., to make the common population aware about the lost glory of their country. The Greater India scholars emphasised the glorious contribution of 'Hindu' India beyond her geographical boundaries. Establishment of the Islamic rule in various South-East Asian nations, they claimed, hindered the process of interaction with India that had started in pre-historic days. Yet, they believed, the Islamic presence could not eradicate the pervading influence of Indian culture which was apparent from the adoption of Sanskrit names, continuation of various artistic, cultural, socio-religious features etc. Both Gangoly and Saraswati pointed out this inclusive and long-term contribution of different regions from India, which, in their views, helped to give shape to the artistic identity of the places they discussed.

Another significant feature of the Greater India study about the antiquity of Indian connection and influence had been acknowledged in these writings. For example, O.C. Gangoly in his article 'On some Hindu relics in Borneo' emphasized that contact with India began in the age of *Puranas*

and it was evident from the reference to the *Barhinadvipa* (Gangoly: 1936). While reviewing such works, one cannot overlook or ignore that their analyses exhibited a pre-conceived notion regarding the absolute influential role of India and their effort to establish Indian origin of the South-East Asian art traditions.

However, at the same time, we should not forget the context and environment in which their scholarly writings were produced. The authors were driven by a nationalist vision and contributed to the cultural construction of India's past. And while doing so, they did not forget their duties as critics and historians. They made readers aware about the contemporary historical research in this area. Through their discussion many Indian and South-East Asian art objects had been highlighted which benefited readers and researchers. Gangoly and Saraswati's minute observations of artefacts and traditions as well as their critical investigation about the artistic interaction between India and South-East Asian regions undoubtedly deserve praise.

### Notes and References

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2. *The Inaugural Report of the Greater India Society* 1926, p. 9
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