

Jim Ede and Alice Richardson

Alina Khakoo

In the diary of Jim Ede's travels around the United States in October-November 1931, Ede wrote, 'in Pittsburg [sic] [...] Ratan Devi, the singer of Punjabi songs in America [...] has promised to sing to me'.¹ Ratan Devi was the stage name of Alice Ethel Richardson, a musician born in Padiham, Lancashire in 1890, who spent her early years as a singer of English folk songs in circles around the Arts and Crafts Movement. After following her then lover, the anti-colonial activist and art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, to Kashmir in 1911, she received classical training from Ustad Abdul Rahim of Kapurthala, before proceeding to give recitals in Britain and the US under the stage name Ratan Devi.² A typical performance began with Ratan Devi 'singing a few European folk-songs with the piano accompaniment', before 'squatting down in Indian fashion, [...] [taking] up the *tambura* in her lap', and singing 'Behāg, Kāndra, Malkaus – [...] [with] exquisite feeling'.³

Both Richardson and Ede were members of a transversal modernist network that spanned the British Empire and metropole during the early twentieth century. Louise Blakeney Williams has described how this network included practitioners in India interested in cosmopolitan nationalism along with Britons protesting against industrial capitalism. As Coomaraswamy wrote in 1906, Asians should 'be grateful to all that is best in our own traditions and at the same time not be unwilling to learn what others can teach us', and in 1909, art critic and educator E. B. Havell decried 'the extremes of immense wealth and the most abject poverty [...] of European cities and their utter moral, spiritual and intellectual depravity'. Those protesting against industrial capitalism were variably supportive of anti-colonial cultural projects in India.⁴ Ede participated in this network during his tenure as Assistant Keeper at the Tate Gallery from 1922–36; for instance, he hosted gatherings of various Indian

¹ H. S. Ede, *A Visit to India*, 1931, p. 58, Kettle's Yard Archive.

² Edward James Crooks, 'John Cage's Entanglement with the Ideas of Coomaraswamy' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of York, 2011) <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/1985/1/John_Cage%27s_Entanglement_with_the_Ideas_of_Coomaraswamy%2C_Ed_Crooks_PhD_thesis.pdf> [accessed 6 December 2024]; Kimberly Croswell, 'Ananda Coomaraswamy: Anarchizing Performance, East and West', *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2020, pp. 467–89, doi:10.1353/mod.2020.0037; Keith Edward Cantú, 'A Triangle of Art: The Relationship between Aleister Crowley, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Ratan Devī', *Religion and the Arts*, vol. 28, nos. 1–2, 2024, pp. 89–106, doi:10.1163/15685292-02801003.

³ As recounted by Rabindranath Tagore in Ratan Devī, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Rabindranath Tagore, *Thirty Songs from the Panjab and Kashmir: Recorded by Ratan Devī with Introduction and Translations by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and a Foreword by Rabindranath Tagore* (Oxford: Oldbourne Press, 1913), p. v. Richardson had several contemporaries who similarly adopted transcultural identities, including the musician Maud MacCarthy, activists Annie Besant and Sister Nivedita, and high court judge John George Woodroffe.

⁴ Louise Blakeney Williams, 'Hybrid Performances Tagore, Yeats, Politics and the Practice of Cosmopolitanism', in Amrita Ghosh and Elizabeth Brewer Redwine (eds.) *Tagore and Yeats: A Postcolonial Re-envisioning* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 63–106, pp. 74–79.

modernists at his home with Helen Ede in Hampstead.⁵ Ede's earliest recorded encounter with Richardson is his attendance of one of her concerts in c. June 1931, following which he and Helen hosted her at their home in Hampstead on 11 August 1931. Then, Ede attended her aforementioned performance in Pittsburgh in October–November 1931; subsequently, he asked Helen Sutherland (a close friend of Helen and Jim Ede) to arrange a concert for Richardson in 1932. The final record is of Ede attending another of Richardson's performances in late 1933–early 1934.⁶ Ede noted his impressions following the Pittsburgh performance:

*It was a delight beyond measure to hear Ratan Devi singing again – her long low room lit by firelight and the swaying of her body to that infinitely searching eastern music, a thing I shall never forget. [...] And in musical beauty how close is our own, 'My Lovely Celia', to some of these and how clearly different the background. England of the Elizabethans, the Golden Age, ease and contentment, English fields dew covered, and India with all its ancient mystic lore, its ages of civilisation, its sorrow, its heat at nighttime, scent laden. Ratan Devi can move from one to the other with a delicious impersonality – the music just falls from her.*⁷

Ede's response articulates the trans-local, universalist aesthetic ideal, able to challenge the 'depravity' of imperial, industrial modernity, which underpinned the global modernist network described above. At the same time, it exposes some of its limitations, including the erasure of historical English and Indian cultures as they were appropriated to provide heavily romanticised ideals to which global modernists might aspire. (Though Ede's refusal to conflate English and Indian cultures shows some resistance to reducing cultures removed from his immediate context.) Ede's account also provides a vivid description of Richardson's atmospheric deployment of sound, choreography and mise-en-scène; yet his notion that Richardson was able to 'move from one [culture] to the other with a delicious impersonality' omits the historical realities dictating physical and cultural global mobility. What enabled Richardson to adopt and discard identities so freely? Would this have been afforded her Indian counterparts in the social and political contexts of her day? The Ede-Richardson connection captures some of the contradictions that beset a cultural movement challenging industrial capitalism in the age of late empire.

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⁵ See Alina Khakoo, 'Jim Ede and India', talk delivered alongside the exhibition *Jim Ede and India* (Kettle's Yard, November 2019) <<https://soundcloud.com/user-698066575/jim-ed-and-india-talk-given-by-alina-khakoo>> [accessed 6 December 2024].

⁶ Letter from Helen Sutherland to Jim and Helen Ede, 7 June 1931, Kettle's Yard Archive, GB 1759 KY/EDE/1/15/6/11; Jim Ede, 1 Elm Row visitor list, GB 1759 KY/EDE/6. Letter from Helen Sutherland to Jim Ede, 27 June 1932, Kettle's Yard Archive, GB 1759 KY/EDE/1/15/7/18; Letter from Helen Sutherland to Jim Ede, January 1934, Kettle's Yard Archive, GB 1759 KY/EDE/1/15/9/5.

⁷ Ede, *A Visit to India*, p. 59. In this passage Ede reproduces contemporary racist cultural representations of Black people and describes Ratan Devi's inclusion of 'negro spirituals' and 'Mississippi boat songs' in her repertoire; further research on this topic would explore the specific implications of Ratan Devi's performance of Black music, and the politics of Blackness more broadly in the Ede-Richardson encounter and their respective philosophies.

About the author

Alina Khakoo is a historian of global majority art and activism in postwar Britain. She works as an Affiliated Lecturer in the Department of History of Art at the University of Cambridge. Her PhD thesis explored British South Asian art, anti-racism and feminism in 1980s Britain, across the contexts of art education, art publishing, archives, and the display of art, thinking through concepts of infrastructure, and unity and difference. Her book *A Brief History of British South Asian Artists* is forthcoming with Tate Publishing in September 2025. She previously worked on the Curatorial team at Kettle's Yard, and on the Panchayat Special Collection, an artist-led archive of Third Worldist contemporary art, now kept at Tate Library.