C. T. Nachiappan and the workers at Kalakshetra Publications, Madras, printing and binding Hanuman Books.
Photographs by Amanda Barrow, 1992

by Raymond Foye

"I like Madras because I was born there and because in Madras the ancient and the modern coexist. Madras is both old and new, and you can find lots of things there--drama, theaters, lectures, religious discourses, musical concerts. Some Madrasis are very orthodox. There are parts of the city where people with a traditional background in Sanskrit are still living. I like talking about Madras much better than talking about India."

--R. K. Narayan, Interview with Stephen R. Graubard
(from: "Another India," Daedalus, Vol. 118, No. 4, Fall 1989)

"People who are without creativity build dead institutions."

--Krishnamurti (Jayakar, 277)

The life of C.T. Nachiappan and the life of his city, Madras, are inextricably entwined. When the British poet W.H. Auden took American citizenship he declined to identify himself flatly with that nation: "I am a New Yorker," was all the poet felt needed explaining. Likewise it is as a "Madrasi" that one identifies C.T. Nachiappan. His vocations have been many, and they reflect the broadness and vitality of the cosmopolitan center where he has made his home these seventy-odd years. His reputation is established in Europe and America as printer and unique practitioner of the book arts. In his village of Adyar, he is better known to the locals as a nature-cure doctor. Further afield, in the surrounding temple cities of Kanchipuram, Madurai or Chidambaram (from whence the initials of his given name are derived), he is known as a devout Hindu, a scholar and ethnographer who has devoted his life to the assembly of an encyclopedia of Hindu gods and their attributes. And in later years, he has become known as a benefactor in the preservation of ancient temple rituals, now in danger of being lost.

Down through the years I have heard Nachiappan's name crop up in some of the unlikeliest of contexts. On a visit to the great scholar of Indian art, Stella Kramrisch, the ninety-two-year-old Viennese hostess spoke at length of the marvelous photography the young Nachiappan was able to contribute to her many volumes on Indian painting, sculpture and architecture. He was as adept in negotiating his way around petty officialdom as he was in carrying the large view camera and floodlights into the darker recesses of temples and caves. In the literary salons of New York, Allen Ginsberg would always quiz me as to Nachiappan's latest publications--the type of books he once referred to as being "published in heaven." Or, on a remote mountain-top in Kauai, while searching out a rare crystal lingam in a Shiva temple, Nachiappan's name was mentioned unexpectedly at lunch as an accomplished Ayurvedic practitioner of the medical arts.

From his four-room, two-storey publishing house overlooking the Bay of Bengal, C.T. Nachiappan has issued a steady stream of pamphlets, books and deluxe editions over the past four decades. A world-wide audience for art and literature has been created and nurtured from this tiny but magical corner of the world. Using handmade paper from Pondicherry, exquisite English monotype and four-colour engraving, Nachiappan's publications could not have been produced anywhere else. Every limitation that has been presented him has been cleverly transformed into an exquisitely enduring strength. Many years ago he sought to acquire a lithography press but found the cost to be hundreds of times beyond his means. A few months later in a customs warehouse he discovered a large unopened crate that was being auctioned off, its contents unknown. Nachiappan placed a meager bid on the crate and acquired it. It contained the lithography press he had been seeking.

The gods have consistently smiled down not only on Nachiappan, but on the corner of the world where he makes his home. There are certain charmed locations in this world where creativity and the life of the mind seem inexplicably fertilized by the very soil underfoot. In ancient times these areas were recognized as holy places, where

sages gathered, temples were built, and oracles imparted their prognostications. In modern times they may be urban bohemian communities -- the Left Bank in Paris, or New York's Greenwich Village. The Madrasi village of Adyar, located on a long sandy beach overlooking the Bay of Bengal, is just such a place. Home to Kalakshetra School of Music and Dance, the Theosophical Society, the Krishnamurti Foundation, and various other schools and temples, it has been a spiritual center and enclave of erudition for the better part of the twentieth century.

It was within the walls of the Theosophical Society in Madras that the twelve-year-old Jawaharlal Nehru first dreamed his dream of Indian independence, inspired by the nationalist lectures of Annie Besant, then President of the Society. And it was here, in 1909, that the Theosophist C.W. Leadbeater "discovered" the fourteen-year-old Krishnamurti walking on the beach with his younger brother Nitya. The story is well known: perceiving the remarkable aura surrounding the boy, Leadbeater soon designated Krishnamurti the new Messiah, as foretold in divine transmissions received by Besant and other Theosophists. It was a role Krishnamurti abruptly renounced in 1930, deeming the occult and the mystic "limitations placed on man on his search for truth." (Jayakar, 80.)

Years later, Krishnamurti founded his own organization just up the road from the Theosophical Society. Here he would return every January for public talks, and the cognoscenti of Madras would gather. On one occasion Krishnamurti spied Nachiappan in the audience, and accosted him with a twinkle in his eye: "Nachiappan, you've been coming to my lectures for fifty years and you haven't learned a thing!" To which Nachi replied with an impish grin: "Well now, Krishnaji, we can't all be as enlightened as you!" It was a teasing exchange, all in the neighborhood.

Just as Krishnamurti was essentially an "adoptee" of the Theosophical Society, Nachiappan found himself in a similar situation at Kalakshetra. After his mother died at an early age, Nachiappan's father decided to enroll the boy in the Montessori school. He was befriended by Rukmini Devi, the great classical Indian dancer, who had returned with a mission from an extended tour with Diaghlev's Ballet Russes: to resuscitate the waning art of bharata natyam.. Nachiappan recalls:

"My mother died very young. I was more or less an orphan. Rukmini Devi liked me because I worked hard as a young boy. She was the one who helped me through school, because I did not have any support. This was 1938. There was a Dutch artist teaching at that time, Conrad Woolring <?> He was a commercial artist and a photographer. One day, he saw what I could do with my hands — I was lettering very well. The library had to catalogue everything, so I created little cards — subject-wise indexes, authors, and so on. He happened to see this lettering and asked the librarian "who did this work?" We located each other. I wanted to learn from him, but the only way I could study with him was during the games period, between five and six in the evening. I never liked to play games, I thought it was a waste of time. But games were compulsory in our days. There was an American housemaster named Felix Layton. He used to drag me brutally to the games field because I was always the last one to leave. Then I approached Rukmini Devi and told her I wanted to learn art, but the only available time seemed to be in the games period. She said yes! So I excused myself from games. Then I started working with Conrad. He knew a bit of everything. He was an excellent photographer, a very fine composer, and a commercial artist trained in Holland. He was a very fine man, a Theosophist. He came to India, like many other Theosophists, to spend time in Adyar. Conrad stayed on from 1938 until 1941. Unfortunately in 1941 he passed away. He was electrocuted. Poor Conrad. I felt so sad when he passed away — in fact that morning I showed him one of my prints, of a rose. I showed him the print and he critiqued it. In the afternoon he was gone. So I spent three years learning from him — commercial art, photography, furniture design, and so on. The furniture in this apartment for instance was designed by him. All solid teak. He got me started very well with these things. I left school the year he died, in 1941. Then I went to college." [Interview with Amanda Barrow, March 7, 1992]

Nachiappan attended President's College on the Marina in Madras. He enrolled in Group Two, Natural Sciences, and specialized in zoology and botany. It may seem an unusual choice in retrospect, but Nachiappan has always harbored a close interest in the sciences. A background in chemistry aided him greatly in his pioneering work

in color photo processing. His studies in ethnobotany—the ways in which plants and humankind interact—has been virtually a second career. An understanding of plant and nature forms likewise informs his work as a designer, since it is from nature that all aspects of ornament derive. And ultimately it is the balance between all living things, the yoga if you will, that is the very principle of life.

After college Nachiappan returned to Kalakshetra, having decided on his life's mission: to assist Rukmini Devi. It was a decisive moment, and one which he has never wavered from. This act of service, of faithful effort on the part of another person, directed towards the greater good of the community, became the motivating force for the rest of his life. His reason for so doing, when asked, was simply stated: "Because she was the one who helped me"

It is difficult to from today's perspective to consider the privation that was the norm at Kalakshetra in those days. Supplies were few, and support from patrons or the state was non-existent. Much of the community at large was hostile towards this project, given the disrepute into which Indian classical music and especially dance had fallen during the period of British domination. Even the artistic community, with the usual orthodoxy and petty jealousies, took a dim view of Devi's project.

Books were scarce at the time, usually ancient Tamil treatises on music or dance. To fill the need for proper textbooks, Kalakshetra borrowed time on the Theosophical Society's printing press, and began publishing textbooks in editions of five hundred copies, two or three a year. At this stage Nachiappan worked strictly as a layout artist and graphic designer, but his interest in printing and photography grew. Kalakshetra owned a great many old photographs that needed to be preserved through copy negatives. Proper documentation of choreography (before the advent of the video camera) was always a vexing problem, requiring an extensive amount of still photography. Soon he convinced the school authorities to establish a photographic darkroom on the grounds of Kalakshetra proper:

"When I joined Kalakshetra in 1945 there were a lot of old photos, and I sorted them out. There was a lot of copying work, a lot of photographic work to be done. It all used to be done at an outside company. I used to go every day to buy paper, collect prints, and so on. Then it occurred to me that if we had a darkroom in Kalakshetra I wouldn't have to do all that running around. So I asked for a small sum, 500 rupees, to buy some photo equipment. I was not trained, but I trained myself to do it.   Dr. [...........] was our treasurer, a very old, orthodox man, who would never think of such a thing. But he had faith in me, so he gave me the money. I created a makeshift darkroom and started working. It was great fun, because that's when I learned to make prints and became a full-fledged photographer. All self-taught. I gained a complete understanding of the black & white photographic process. At Kalakshetra I had the freedom to use what I earned to buy more equipment. In time the department became a little bit better and well known because I was the first person in Madras to process an ektachrome transparency. I was also the first one to start Kodacolor processing and printing. This brought me a lot of work from movie people. So I earned a little money, and put it back into the department. By 1958, it became a very well-known color processing factory in Madras. It was called Kalakshetra Color Laboratories. It was not mine, I was an employee. I was earning in those days 250 rupees. I took only enough for food, water, and lodging. There were eight or nine of us who worked on an honorary basis, because we felt it was good work, we should be like missionaries. In 1958 it became a full-fledged photo department earning money, and by then we had 200,000 rupees worth of equipment." [Barrow, 1992]

Through his contacts in the photo processing business, Nachiappan soon establish influential contacts worldwide. Staff photographers for Time, Life, and National Geographic magazines were all clients of his, as were numerous photographers from the Magnum photo agency, including the great Henri Cartier-Bresson, whom Nachiappan counted as a close friend. Nachiappan also served as a technical advisor in Madras to the multi-national advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson. It was only a matter of time before Nachiappan felt the lure of the world at large, and in 1963, with a host of invitations, support, and sponsorship from the connections he had

made as a lab technician, he set off on his first trip abroad. “You know, you will find a Magnum photographer in every country, Nachiappan recalled, “so starting in Hong Kong and all the way round the world I had help from Magnum photographers.”

When he arrived in New York, Nachiappan studied color photo processes at Eastman-Kodak, and the Rochester Institute of Technology. In these days Nachiappan lived on a shoestring budget. In Rochester for three months he stayed in the YMCA for eighteen dollars a week. His first impression of America was how high the beds were off the ground. “What happens if you roll off?”, he thought to himself The cafeteria dinner there cost one dollar, and breakfast was fifty cents. Eastman-Kodak provided lunch free. Through Kodak, he made connections in the commercial photography business in New York City. There he usually ate at the now-defunct Automat, famous self-serve restaurants where one could first see the food through a little glass door before inserting a coin to make the purchase. There he could select a vegetarian meal for less than a dollar.

“In New York City I was introduced to David [.............] , who was a very well-known photographer doing ad work for Time and Life. He had a studio in Manhattan and had me work for him for three months in 1963. I worked with David on Kellogg's Corn Flakes ads. And oh, it was fun working in this studio every day! I was an assistant, I would set up the photographer's camera, set up the scene — you know, dress up the little piece of chicken just right, make sure the light is perfect. He had his own dummy kitchen, with fake ice cream which looks as if it's melting but it's not! One day, David asked me where I would go when the photographers ate lunch. Every lunch hour I would disappear to the Jewish kosher restaurant on 42nd street because I could eat vegetarian there. David said, "Come on you grass-eater, stay with us during lunch and I will feed you vegetables." So you see, he really took care of me — a very fine man. He would sell a color transparency for $500 to $1,000 apiece, a fantastic fee in those days! He would sell ten transparencies for ten thousand dollars, just like that. For one day's work!

There has been a lot of change since then. All the typesetters have disappeared. So these experiences I had in Manhattan are now history. I went to a collotype company to study. A collotype is color printing without a screen, by a matrix process. I would say it is still the best color reproduction for museum reproduction work. I spent a lot of time with the collotype people. I tried to find them again in the 1970s, but they all disappeared. You know, the change in the Manhattan marketplace has been so tremendous.
So I learned collotype, photographic color processing, I learned a lot of things in Manhattan. Then my friend Glen Petersen asked me to supervise Petersen Color Labs. He offered me $2,000 a month, in those days a very good salary. I said no! Because firstly I cannot survive in Manhattan for that long, and secondly, what would I do, living there in a cubby hole for three years? No, I thought, I've come here for Kalakshetra to learn things to take back to India.”
[Barrow, 1992]

That autumn, Nachiappan continued on his long trip back to India. He arrived in Milan on Christmas eve, and attended midnight mass in the great cathedral there, a beautiful and moving experience of which he still speaks. His final stopping off point was Greece. By now his funds had dwindled to where he was no longer able to eat lunch. On his final day abroad he climbed atop the Acropolis before dawn to watch the sunrise. That evening he boarded a plane and returned to Madras.

The next fifteen years were a tremendously exciting time for Nachiappan and Kalakshetra. The tradition that had been established by Rukmini Devi had taken root. “To have gathered a live tradition from the air,” in the words of poet Ezra Pound, aptly describes the undertaking at Kalakshetra. It had become a vital institution, with the school at the core: it had been well understood by Rukmini Devi that the only way to have a steady supply of dancers was to establish a place in which to train them--not merely in the technicalities of the dance, but in all of the interrelated disciplines that must inform the dance:

“Bharata’s Natya Sastra is the oldest treatise of Hindu dramatic art. Natya means dance and mimed representation, but from its origin the Hindu theater was a total art. It is dance, mimicry, music, chant, poetry, architecture, mise-en-scène, and even painting. The Natya Sastra is, in all these matters, the first authority; it is traditional knowledge; it is even called the fifth Veda.”   (Rene Daumal, “The Origin of the Theater of Bharata,” in Rasa, tr. Louise Landes Levi, NY: New Directions, 1982, p39)

The 1960s were a time when the outside world rediscovered India and its message, and Nachiappan often speaks with delight of this period. Despite the occasional excesses or misunderstandings on the part of many visitors, the exchange of ideas between India and the West deeply affected popular culture and philosophy. It may be part of his background amongst the old theosophists in Adyar, but Nachiappan has always held a strong belief in the essential unity of experience, and an intrinsic understanding of the fundamental principles of Indian thought, which are indeed the understructure of all language and philosophy in the West. Perhaps it is indicative of his background, or even something inherent in the Dravidian nature, but he is a man of adaptability, many-sided in his interests. Like the Ambassador automobile he drives, or the English monotype machines in his shop, his attitude is pliant: if a missing piece cannot be found, one simply makes it anew. Parts, like ideas, are interchangeable. It is the more important attitude of open-mindedness that takes precedence, and I believe this accounts for both his longevity and good-naturedness.

Nachiappan’s response to difficult situations is always a kind of infectious laughter that seems to echo the riddles of life and death one finds in the ancient myths. In spite of great odds, production schedules were always met, yet one was never quite certain how. Once when he asked me to obtain in New York a wristwatch that told time by the phases of the moon, I thought I might have come closest to divining his methods.

Kalakshetra Publications, as the printing office came to be called, was now producing books for the Montessori schools world-wide. For Kalakshetra proper there were always textbooks, dance programme, placards and posters, yearbooks and the like. Work was regularly turned away. And yet by the late 1970s, the successive generations of technological advance in the color processing business brought about a momentous decision for Nachiappan:

“By 1975, technology had come to India. All my boys left for other jobs, or opened businesses on their own, because working on the German machine made them able to do full graphic work on the new technologies. Because I had been a pioneer, people asked me why I didn't switch to the new technologies. But it meant a lot of money — up to a million dollars in new investments. I said no. You know my attitude. It's not just good printing and art. It has to do with my philosophy, Eastern ideas. I must also have a quality of life. Why borrow a million dollars to buy these new machines then work myself to death to pay the bank? Why? Let me stay with what I know.” [Barrow, 1992]

This decision proved to be a momentous one, perhaps more so than Nachiappan would realize at the time. For whilst the industrial and commercial clients fell away to more technologically advanced printers, a whole new generation of artists, poets and publishers would soon search him out for precisely what they could not find in modern technology: the handmade, and a quality of craftsmanship that spoke of another era. It was a perfect example of the fundamental lie of progress—that one must always go forward. By stepping back, into the world of English monotype, collotype, four-color letterpress and engraving, hand-sewn bindings and the like, Nachiappan unwittingly set the course for the second half of his career as a printer and book artist, and one that would bring him world-wide fame.

[end part one]

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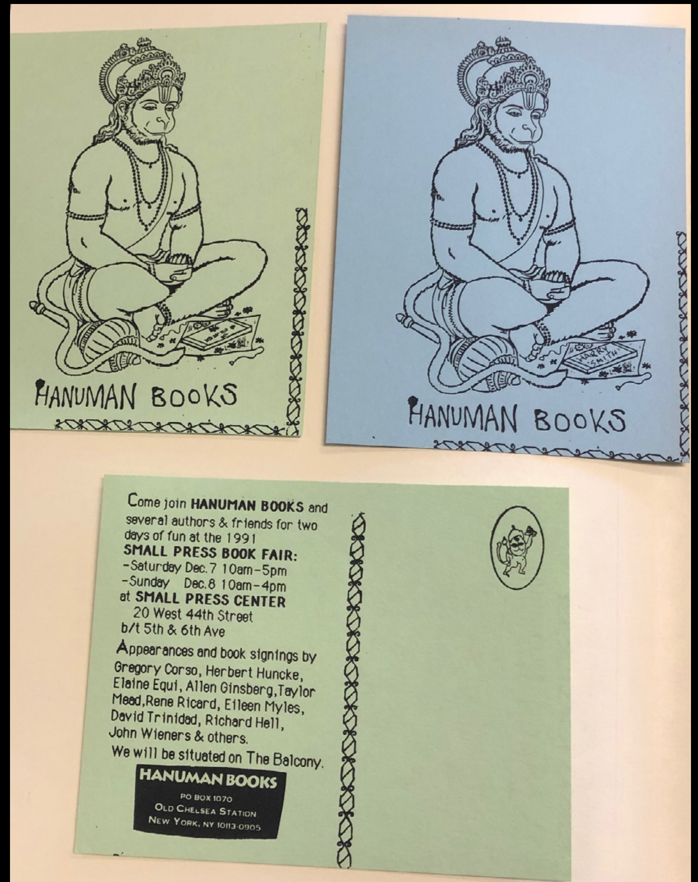

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