# Indian Art

by

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Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 15, No. 3 & 4 (Summer-Autumn, 1983).
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*The following article is an extract from the prospectus written by A. K. Coomaraswamy as an introduction to a university course on Indian Art.*

**Value of this discipline.** Culture is consciousness; primarily, an unprejudiced comprehension of one's own civilization. This is only possible when we have some idea of its relation to other cultures—likenesses and differences. A capacity for making subtle distinctions must be cultivated actively. Current ideas about the Orient are still excessively crude, that is, either romantic, or intolerant; this is a provincial rather than a cultured condition. To make fine distinctions the student must adopt an entirely disinterested attitude, laying aside notions of "this is higher" or "best"; education and *a priori* judgment are incompatible. Personal preferences should be reserved for personal use; only unprejudiced consideration is permissible to the student as such, or to a citizen of the world.

**Art.** Even in Europe, until quite modern times, art was not regarded as an activity to be practiced only by persons possessing peculiar sensibilities and called artists, nor thought of as appealing only to other narrow groups called critics or connoisseurs or lovers of art. Art meant "man's way of accomplishing his ends", or of doing things. Art was not a product of individual fancy or of personal taste, requiring explanation to contemporary persons, but was a product of the general cultural necessity of a given time and place. It was produced *incidentally* rather than deliberately, by everyone, and was intelligible to all. The modern distinction of "fine" and "decorative" art is fallacious; nor is art something that can be applied to objects that would otherwise be merely useful. All art is simply man's handiwork done finely.

Art is thus not a product of individual genius only, but integrally interwoven with life. The content and emphasis of life have varied with time and place. Since the art we are to study is that of an unfamiliar time and place, and because we are not going to be content with saying "I know what I like" (in which case a course on this subject would be superfluous), but rather hope to like what we shall know, it will be necessary to give a large part of our time to a preliminary study of the material and psychological environment in which the art became inevitably just what it is. Moreover, the major premises of a culture must be known before we can apply an accurate terminology to the art. In any case, we shall not be able to understand it, and therefore not be able to enjoy it otherwise than quite superficially, so long as it appears to us quaint, exotic, mysterious, or arbitrary. Indian art in its own environment was none of these things, and "Wer den Dichter will verstehen, muss in Dichters Lande gehen".[1]

## AESTHETICS

Definition required because of the current vague usage of terms.

**Art.** "Art is expression" (Croce): Art (*kāvya*) is a statement informed by *rāsa* (*Sahityadarpana*)*:* art is man's handiwork. Art is fine or beautiful to the degree in which it is done finely and achieves its proper intentions; it is non-art or ugly to the degree in which it is done carelessly and fails to achieve its proper intentions. These intentions are always the satisfaction of human necessities, which necessities are never purely practical (physical) nor purely theoretical (spiritual); man needs bread, but does not live by bread alone. When these necessities are purely individual, art is isolated from its environment and requires explanation even to contemporaries, and it is difficult to see why such art should be exhibited. When these necessities are general e.g. (early Italian painting or Indian sculpture), art is comprehensible to all normal contemporaries, and is used rather than exhibited. The latter kind of art may even become "universal", i.e. comprehensible and serviceable beyond its original environment.

The analysis of a work of art may be made as follows:

- *Theme, subject, problem* or *function*: e.g. (1) a Madonna, (2) the fact of pleasure, (3) a table.
- *Shape, formula, symbol, convention*: thus, (1) nimbate woman and child, blue robe, hand raised in blessing etc., (2) the *word* pleasure, (3) a plane surface.

**Content.** It may be either adequate or inadequate to the foregoing predetermined requirements. The subject label Madonna, and customary signs (blue mantle, etc.) do not alone ensure the desired values. These are only present when the work has been "felt" by a self-identification of artist and theme (yoga). In the spectator (critic) the process is reversed, the finished work leading by in-feeling (*einfühlung*, *Sādhārana*) to a new self-identification with the theme.

**Form.** As shape is the outward expression of theme, so form is the outward manifestation of content; subject is made known by shape, actual value by form. Theme and shape are consciously determined, and subject to change at will or to order; content and form are

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1. Editor's Note: Translated, this quotation from Goethe reads: "He who will understand the poet, must visit the poet's country."

dependent, not on the will, but on virtue, or, let us say, the grace of God. Varying degrees of such grace or energy distinguish successive periods (e.g. primitive, classic, decadent) in the history of any one cycle of art, forming a stylistic sequence. However the word "style" more generally designates idiom, with regard to the characteristic shapes and formula or a given ethnic group or period, and the concept "stylistic sequence" embraces also the changes that take place in this field. The ability to date objects more or less exactly "on stylistic grounds" demands an acquaintance with idiom or vocabulary, as well as a sensibility to aesthetic values.

Convention means agreement, and reference to the existence of a common understanding between artist and spectator as to the meaning of the symbols employed. All art, even the most realistic, is highly conventional, hence the term "conventional" should not be employed as though synonymous with "decadent"; the most decadent art may be entirely personal and unconventional.

The term "decorative" applied to art has very little real meaning, or if any, then must be held to designate art in which the design and pattern elements (always present) predominate.

**Ideal** art is such as does not represent anything in nature, but expresses a concept; for example, a straight line, representing to the eye the idea of the shortest distance between two points, or forming the "frame" of a picture. *Idealistic* should have the same significance, but is generally used in a more popular sense with reference to the selection per exaggeration of forms existing in nature, i.e. to a combination of perfections satisfactory to personal or racial taste. In this ethical and sympathetic sense, art is idealistic.

**Naturalistic,** realistic, illusionistic art are opposite to ideal and idealistic, striving as far as possible to reproduce natural appearance.

**Objective beauty,** or loveliness (*srī, rūpa, saundarya*). Alien ethnic tastes and interests, like our own, are beyond aesthetic criticism; they certainly cannot be judged by our own, but must be recognized and taken for granted before we can begin to study a stylistic sequence or to estimate relative values within a sequence… Not that it is necessary to adopt for ourselves Indian ideals of objective beauty (a purely romantic aim), but that we must recognize not merely their existence, but their full right to existence. It will not do to say that because American or Christian ideals are good, therefore ideals in general can only be good insofar as they are of the American or Christian kind. For all we know, the Deity is equally well pleased with the beauty of a Chinaman, and the beauty of a Yankee.

Objective and idealistic beauty, and objective ugliness are sources respectively of interested pleasure and of distaste. All such pleasure and pain are sympathetic rather than aesthetic in nature. However, these interests connected with the subject include the essentially human values of art as a practical factor in men's lives and are the original causes of production. Pleasures and interests derived from works of art include (1) pleasure or interest in the theme or subject dealt with, depending on associations, e.g. the pleasure derived from the recognition of a loved person or favorite scene, or that felt when an idealistic work endorses our taste in matters of physical form or in the ethical field (as beauty in women, or nobility in conduct), and (2) pleasure directly derived from the sight or use of skilled or curious workmanship (such pleasure must date back to the stone age, and we have certain literary evidence of it in the Vedas), or from the color, texture, or shape of the object regarded as simply part of our environment, also the pleasure derived from the intellectual perception of order in design (symmetry, rhythm, etc.,) and the comprehension of its principles, or, finally the pleasure derived from an acquired ability to classify or catalogue works of art. Corresponding displeasures are possible. In all these matters, the setting up of absolute standards is by the nature of the case impossible; all is relative. But although absolute standards are here unthinkable, it is inevitable and obvious that particular standards may and will prevail in any given culture at any one time; every culture is a style. The local standards are determined by local environment, past and present, material and psychological, and must be accepted once and for all, in their own environment.

It is obvious that local standards of objective beauty, passing fashions, cannot be taken as criteria of artistic quality; it will be far better for us, we shall enjoy ourselves much more, if when we examine a given work, we can for the moment endorse and take for granted all the preferences proper to and current in its original human environment. There may remain instances in which human weakness (strength of prejudice) actually precludes even an imaginative appreciation of a theme alien to our own spirit; in this case we must be prepared to admire a work that we do not like or admit that we like a work which we do not really respect as a great artistic achievement. These attitudes are excusable only if we know just what is taking place. A wise monk will admit the beauty of Goya's *Maja Desnuda,* but will not desire to hang the picture in his cell. If ever the subject matter of a particular work of Indian art, or an Indian ideal of objective beauty or conduct should annoy you, reflect (1) that you may be able later to take at least an imaginative pleasure in what at first you do not understand or do not like (2) that the uncultured Oriental man has precisely analogous but contrary prejudices which make it very difficult for him to accept European taste and ideals, and that in this respect you are no better than he is, and (3) that there remains a possibility of aesthetic experience above and beyond this field of likes and dislikes.

**Aesthetic experience,** disinterested pleasure, *rāsa,* absolute beauty. That aesthetic experience does not depend on subject or other sympathetic considerations (a beautiful model does not necessarily mean a beautiful work of art, a noble action may be ignobly represented) was first clearly (I believe) enunciated by Dhanamjaya in the 10th century: "Delightful or disgusting, exalted or lowly, cruel or compassionate, recondite, artificial, or imaginary, there is no subject which cannot (when dealt with in or as art) evoke *rāsa* in man".

Aesthetic experience defined as the *tasting of rāsa:* terminology *rāsa* = flavor, essence, vital principle, beauty that which makes art art. *Rāsavant* = "possessing *rāsa*", said of a work of art as distinguished from mere bald statement or functioning. *Rāsika* = one who tastes the flavor of a work of art, one who is aesthetically sensitive or trained, a critic, connoisseur. *Rās āśvādana* = the tasting of *rāsa,* aesthetic experience. Example of the method: *kāvyam rāsātmakam vācaka,* "poetry is a statement informed by *rāsa",* or in more general terms, "art is a means or statement informed by beauty".

The experience *rasāśvadana* is no more ultimately definable than love: like any other ecstasy (being outside of or free from oneself); it is altogether subjective, theoretical, disinterest, and more supersensual, analogous to or identical with perfect experience, the recognition of unity of the self with the Absolute, called *Brahmasvadana,* the tasting of Brahma. The capacity for it is innate and cannot be taught, e.g. the saying of Blake "Knowledge of Ideal Beauty is not to be acquired, it is born with us". However the capacity may be released or set free from inhibiting conditions and this is all that a course in the appreciation of art can ever do for the student. Aesthetic experience is an activity on the part of the spectator; all that the artist can do is to provide the conditions or opportunity for it, "just as in the case of children playing with clay elephants". Because aesthetic experience is a creative activity of the spectator, it may be produced by the most austere and objectively unsatisfying "primitives", or by damaged and fragmentary works, which we are moved to enliven or complete imaginatively (this does not mean by "correction" or "restoration", nor imply that such works could have been in any way whatever "improved"). Even a late and unfelt work, in which nevertheless a great traditional composition is preserved (such as we may have seen elsewhere more adequately treated), may be respected. But a sentimental work, in which a transient mood has displaced the expected permanent mood (as in a modern "plaster Madonna") cannot evoke delight merely by its cheap objective prettiness. Aesthetic experience is not caused by the attractiveness or otherwise of the subject matter. But here we reach precisely one of those inhibitory conditions, which can be removed by an explanation of the necessity and therefore justification of the unfamiliar or at first sight unattractive or uninteresting theme. The theme is not indeed the art; but we must consent to the theme before we can enjoy the art. The proper function of a course in the history of art is to provide such knowledge and understanding. However, the ultimate value of any teaching depends much more on the pupil than the teacher.

**The artist.** A general term covering sculpture, reliefs, painting, is *citra,* but this word is also often used in a more restricted sense to denote painting only. *Śilpa* is the practical activity of the craftsman, rather than "art" in the modern sense; the craftsman works "according to *śilpa* traditions". The artist or craftsman is designated a *śilpin* (artist), *sthapati* (sitter up), *karmāra* (maker), *rūpakāra* or *pratimākāra* (imager), etc. The higher craftsmen practice many arts; the architect, for example, is also a sculptor, founder, and goldsmith; but handworkers in such as iron smiths, weavers and potters, are restricted to a single craft. No artist is merely a designer, but always an actual maker of things.

The *śilpin* is not thought of as a peculiar individual with special sensibilities but simply as a trained man meeting a general demand. His vocation is hereditary, and his education received in the workshop as pupil and assistant. He is expected to be an honest god-fearing responsible citizen like any other man; amateurs and "Bohemians" are equally unknown. On the other hand the imager is only in quite exceptional cases a man of religion by profession; almost invariably he is a guildman, employed by a patron to undertake ecclesiastical or secular work now for one, now for another sect, which affords an additional explanation of the fact that India knows no sectarian styles, but merely sectarian application of the style current in any one time or place. The imager is not consciously concerned with the expression of anything peculiar to himself. He has the same sense of freedom (comparable to our sense of freewill) which all workers in a traditional school seem to feel; but that he should have a private ideal of beauty differing from that of his time, would be regarded as an egotistic aberration, and to devote one's life to such a private ideal would appear ridiculous. Genius is not an individual achievement, but simply the quality of the society at a given period; in the works of a given school therefore, practically the same degree of vitality appears: everywhere (even in the minor arts) the workmanship of individuals is only to be distinguished by varying degrees of skill. The craftsman works in the style of his own period as naturally and unconsciously as he speaks his mother-tongue, unconscious of its philological relationships; he is aware of skill or lack of skill in his own or his contemporaries' work, but not at all aware of his own virtue in a great period, or his own weakness in a decadent one. It is only subsequently and now that looking back historically, we observe, study, and interpret a stylistic sequence. Under the healthy conditions outlined above, it is only natural that the names of artists should not have been recorded even on the most magnificent works, with only rare and accidental exceptions. The idea of art for art's sake has remained unknown; art has been made for man, not man for art. Yet in his works man has inevitably preserved a faithful record of himself; and the sequence of styles (which forms the theme for our study of the history of art) reveals the increased and decreased vitality, the spiritual history of societies in which material prosperity, imperial power, theological speculation, and artistic virtue are coeval manifestations.

**Perspective.** Modern "scientific" perspective is designed to reproduce the facts of vision. Asiatic art (Assyrian, Indian, Persian, Chinese, etc.,) uses another scheme for representing space relations, viz. vertical projection or *perspective à cheval.* Thus conceived, the subject matter is spread out towards the top of the frame, so that what is behind in nature appears as above in the picture. This method has one great advantage in composition, that objects behind are not concealed by those in the foreground; this is of particular value in the representation of crowds. The real existence of objects in space is also more definitely felt, inasmuch as a common ambient encloses spectator and scene. Further, the necessity does not arise of making distant objects much smaller than those near at hand. Foreground, middle distance, and distance are respectively lower, middle and high within the frame; and once the formula is understood, the intended special relations become even more simply realized than in “scientific” vision.

**Continuous narration.** This term designates the common Oriental and especially Indian method of combining successive or widely separated events in one composition, within a single frame. Some analogy here to the “cutback” of cinema convention. All transitions from full continuous narration, through the representation of scenes divided by walls, foliage, etc., to the restriction of one frame will be met with.

**Many-armed images.** Verbal allusions to deities conceived as having many members occur in the Vedas, but the method does not appear until after 100 A.D. (Kusana period), when four-armed and three-headed images of Siva are found on coins. The additional heads or arms reflect a conception of synthetic personality or multiple function. The arms, in particular serve to hold additional attributes. As the theology is more greatly elaborated, forms with more heads or arms are met with. Types of winged deities appear earlier, as well as some combining human and animal forms. The latter, especially the winged forms, are analogous to the angels, etc., of European, Greek, and Egyptian art. In any case, it should be realized that such combinations represent not aesthetic qualities, but iconographic data or problems. The student may be disconcerted at first sight by a many-armed image, but he will not in fact *vyaktāvyakta* (partly manifested, as in a *mukhalingam*), and *vyakta* (fully manifested). Images permanently established in shrines are *mulavigraha* or *dhruva bera,* those used in processions are *utsava-murti,* others used by individuals are *bhoga bera.* Others are classified according to the pose or activity e.g. *sayana-murti,* a reclining form: *nrtta-mūrti*, a dancing image; *samhara-mūrti*, one occupied in destruction. Also according to the material of which they are made. Consecration is *āvahana,* desecration (dismissal) *visarjana.* Some images are only made for temporary use.

## INDIAN SCULPTURE

Indian sculptures are almost exclusively religious in theme and application: they include (1) cult images, whether those of the main shrine (usually in stones), or those used in processions (usually in metal), and (2) reliefs, originally parts of the architecture of the shrines, representing deities or decorative themes with or without specific symbolic significance. Broadly speaking every detail has, or once had a definite meaning. Stone images range in date from the third century B.C. up to the present day; some in terra-cotta are older.

Indian religious imagery is probably of indigenous rather than of Aryan origin. The whole conception of a cult with its office (*pūjā*) and images (*mūrti, pratimā*) is alien to Vedic Brahmanism with its sacrificial ritual (*yajña*); and even more so to the philosophy of the Upanishads and the psychology of early Buddhism and Jainism, which call for personal insight, effort, and discipline, practiced outside and even at the expense of the social order. But at the same time, the devotional (*bhakti*) worship of gods as persons represented by symbols or images set up in shrines, seems to have been characteristic of the indigenous non-Aryan bulk of the population, attached to the routine of daily life; and these cults or local deities may well have descended from a millennial antiquity.

By the fifth century B.C. the outlines of these broad distinctions had been greatly modified; the Aryan invaders had already become Indians, profoundly influenced by their environment materially and psycho-logically. The non-Aryan masses, on the other hand, had been (already in the North and later in the South) at once superficially and indelibly Aryanized; that is to say they had come to speak an Aryan dialect (Prākrit), and to accept with some reservations the divinity of Brāhmans, but continued (whatever their more orthodox sectarian affiliations might be) to worship in their own way local and tutelary divinities such as Yaksas (genii) and Nāgas (dragons), and goddesses of prosperity, fertility, or disease. A partial mixing of blood by *métissage* must also be taken into account.

The resulting religious culture known to us as Hinduism (which, as far as cult and iconography are concerned may be taken as including Buddhism and Jainism) is a fusion-product of the conditions outlined above. Fundamentally of popular origin, its ultimate sanctions are to be found in Brāhmanical philosophy, and its systematic organization is the work of professional theologians. As a religion it is a worship of God in innumerable forms; innumerable, (1) because each, according to the genius of Hinduism, is acceptable as *a* form rather than as *the* form of the deity, (2) because the varieties of human experience demand a variety of resort, and (3) because, in historical fact, innumerable deities, local or tribal, originally distinct, have been incorporated into a common pantheon as aspects or incarnations of a supreme deity. As a philosophy, Hinduism teaches the sole existence of a Supreme Reality, transcending all forms, even those of gods, which are in fact no more than temporal creations of humanity imagined and determined according to the limitations and needs of humanity.

The orthodox conception of devotional religion thus evolved is summarized with supreme genius in the most popular of all Indian scriptures, the *Bhagavad Gītā,* — the one book with which the student of India, even the student of Indian art if he confines himself to a single book, should familiarize himself. Here we find the religious philosophy of Indian society, not that of any particular ascetic order. The teaching is that spiritual freedom (*moksa, nirvāna,* the *summum bonum,* here conceived in terms of union with the Supreme Being) is best attained through a selfless devotion to the fulfillment of function (*dharma*), and by loving devotion to the deity, under whatsoever form he may be worshipped.

In this religious world the ritual — typically the offering of prayers, flowers, lights, incense, music—and the image itself regarded as focal point of thought directed toward the deity, are means (*sādhana*) of approach and attainment, no more and no less. In other words, Hindu sculpture has never been regarded in the modern sense of the word as “Art”. It was not a product of personal imaginings and sensibilities, but of skilled craftsmanship applied to set problems, just as in mediaeval Christian art all its problems were presented to the sculptor by the Church. It was not for him to create, but to realize the prescribed types; and to this end we find the types clearly described in the craftsmen's handbook (*Śilpa Sastras*) which serve the modern student as manuals of iconography. The craftsmen had to visualize these descriptions in Yoga, and from this mental image to actualize the form in wood or stone or metal as the case might be. Thus, the plastic elements available are used as a language for the expression of spiritual ideas and feelings. Needless to say, in the language of Art there is no inherent necessity of conformity to the visual appearances of the world; the only necessity is for clarity of statement, and this will depend upon the inner consistency of the whole, not upon the resemblance of parts to things seen; for example, four-armed images are no more than a winged Grecian Nike to be dismissed as monstrosities; they represent iconographic problems, and as themes are amenable only to theological, not to aesthetic, criticism. Every work has to be judged on its own merits, not as theme, but as realization.

From what has been said above as to the purpose intended to be served by Indian sculptures, it will be realized that their original value depended primarily upon hieratic justification and on sanctity, not on their relative aesthetic merit. The Indian sculptor well understood the difference between skill and lack of skill, but our modern use of the terms good and bad, as applied to works of art, would have been incomprehensible to him. At the same time the most casual observer will recognize that Indian sculptures, like those of other countries vary greatly in aesthetic virtue, and that in diverse works dealing with one and the same theme a very different content may be expressed. If the sculptures are considered without reference to historic sequence and geographical relationship, these variations will appear both arbitrary and confusing, and are likely to be attributed to the individual peculiarities of different "artists", with which they have very little in fact, to do. Studied historically and geographically, on the other hand, it will be found that all the works of any one period and place are very much alike in degree and quality of virtue. The varying content (more or less emotional, for example) and aesthetic merit, (greater or less vitality and consciousness) are thus soon to be characteristic of particular periods and ethnic environments. These secular and regional variations were certainly not intentional or conscious, they were merely inevitable.

In other words we find in Indian art and its branches the same great cycle, and sub-cycles, that are characteristic of other artistic cycles. There is a primitive creative period characterized by reserve and power together with a certain awkwardness; a time of flowering in which accomplishment is adequate to all demands of the creative imagination, and in which the earlier plastic amplitude is rendered with freer movement, grace and charm; a period of gradual attenuation, in which the formulae, created with so much energy, are no longer felt, and when conscious graces and subtleties of craftsmanship have become ends in themselves; a rococo period of greatest intricacy in which form is overwhelmed by ornament; and finally a growing carelessness. The latest phase only, that of a pseudo-return to Nature (secularization, realism, anecdote) is not represented in India. These unconscious stylistic sequences are not merely of artistic interest, for life and art are here inseparable; they correspond to like crises in the religious, political, and social history of the race.

## SOME NOTES ON CASTE

**Caste.** (*varṇa,* colour; *jāti,* birth), with religious sanction, forms the basis of the social order. Governs matters of bed, board, and occupation; but occupational restrictions have never been strict, and even the early law books permit various occupations to Brahmins, especially in time of need. Theoretically four castes, viz. *Brāhmana, Ksatriya, Vaisya* and *Sudra*; the first three of these are "twice-born", receive initiation at puberty, wear the sacred thread, and may study the Vedas. *Brāhmanas* ("Brahmins"), the priestly caste; their natural home the hermitage, but act also as chaplains and king's ministers, conducting sacrifices and acting as advisers. Represent an idealization of poverty, and may not "sell the Vedas", i.e. be paid for teaching; must live by gifts, and actually have a great reputation for greed. To be a priest in the sense of temple official is regarded as demeaning.

There have been a few Brahman dynasties. *Ksatriya,* the governing and military caste, whose essential function is protection of the kingdom, and the maintenance of order. The welfare of the kingdom depend on the king's virtue and virility. *Vaisyas,* occupied with trade and cattle. The *Sudras* are artisan and servile groups (excluded from sacrifices, from studying the Vedas, practicing yoga, marriage with higher castes, etc.), but share in devotional theism of Hinduism; are members of the household and not in any sense "outcastes". Certain artisan castes (*rathakāras* and *karmāras,* whose services were necessary to the sacrifice or who are temple architects and sculptors) had and have a privileged position, sometimes claiming equality with the *Brāhmanas*. Castes are actually much more numerous than four; arise by intermarriage, new occupations, new sects, absorption of tribes not previously Hinduized, either foreign or indigenous. The characteristic principle of caste as the base of social structure is *sva-dharma,* "own duty" or own function, the doing of the work proper to "that station of life to what it has pleased God to call you", in other words, vocation. Thus every occupation appears honorable to those engaged in it; priest and scavenger have each their own "honor". In general, the higher the form of life, and stricter the ethical demands; e.g. *Sūdra* widows may remarry, meat is eaten, and strong drinks permitted, things forbidden to higher castes. The prestige of the higher ideals gradually raises the whole standard of living, as all castes may in a sense be called disciples of the Brahmins. Example, a rich *Sūdra* may employ a Brahman cook, who would not under any circumstances marry his daughter; he must provide ritual purity in the kitchen, and will be given only such foods as Brahmins use, though the Brahman will not eat with his master. Character and value of caste have been much misunderstood; essential values, the preservation of traditional learning and hereditary aptitudes, permeation of social ideals by example, and elimination of social ambition, does not in any way interfere with economic or political co-operation. Parallels in modern professional groups (doctors, lawyers, etc.) each with their own special ethics, though lacking the hereditary principle.