DE TOCQUEVILLE IN INDIA: AN ESSAY ON THE CASTE SYSTEM

(Review article)

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It is not surprising that a brilliant book on caste in India should come from a Frenchman immersed in the traditions of the writer of Democracy in America. In his new book, Professor Louis Dumont brings about a confrontation between Western concepts of equality and Indian concepts of hierarchy with remarkable effectiveness.

De Tocqueville in a passage quoted by Dumont (p. 32) writes as follows:

L'individualisme est une expression récente qu'une idée nouvelle a fait naître. Nos pères ne connaissaient que l'egoïsme ... L'individualisme est d'origine démocratique, et il menace de se développer à mesure que les conditions s'égalisent.

What about these ideas of de Tocqueville's then in conditions of inequality? What happens to them in the context of Indian caste systems? Such is the remarkable note on which Dumont commences his exposition and summary of the institution of caste and of the most recent anthropological work in India.

Dumont, as the author of Une sous-caste de l'Inde du sud (1957a), Hierarchy and marriage alliance in south Indian kinship (1957b), La civilisation indienne et nous (1964), and as the co-editor of Contributions to Indian Sociology, is particularly well qualified for the task. It is a task which calls for extraordinary gifts of scholarship. The author needs to control not only the formidable past work on Indian caste but also the literature on Hindu ideology and religion as well as the considerable body of modern fieldwork in India. But Dumont has other gifts as well: he possesses an intimate knowledge of sociological theory as well as a noteworthy depth of scholarship on nineteenth and twentieth century Indian politics. It is understandable that a work of such ambitious dimensions has not been recently attempted by scholars on India.

The general outlines of the book are clear. Dumont commences with a chapter on the confrontation noted above between Western concepts of equality and Indian concepts of hierarchy. He then moves directly on to the question of caste. He deals with the history of ideas concerning caste, caste ideology and the opposition of purity and pollution, the varna system, the relationship between the ritual hierarchy and political power, and concepts of attribution and interaction in the next three chapters. The ideas are trenchantly presented; and for those uninitiated into the subtleties of Indian caste, these chapters would provide a most succinct introduction. And since the specialists are taken to task in footnotes which

have the effect of well placed karate blows, there is much to interest the initiated as well.

The next three chapters are concerned with the division of labour, jajmani system, Mayer’s work in central India (1960), marriage, hypergamy and endogamy, the caste rules of contact and food, and ideas of vegetarianism. These are followed by two chapters on the village community, Srinivas’s concept of dominance (1955; 1959), and the systems of authority and panchayats.

This is the substantial body of the book. It is then followed by three important chapters dealing with stability and change in caste systems, the question of caste outside India, and finally the question of the individual in systems of hierarchy and equality.

Dumont is interested in the confrontation between Indian caste society and the West primarily because he sees the task of anthropology as being not only the analysis of the workings of another society but more significantly as being the interpretation of the principles of that society to the West. Like Lévi-Strauss he also regards the establishment of such difficult communication as a primary task of anthropology. He observes that this wrestling with alien systems of ideas and the attempts to express them in the vocabulary of Western languages illuminates in turn the principles of Western society. So the task of anthropology is very far from finished.

It must be said that Dumont’s account of the confrontation between the egalitarian West and hierarchical India is more in the nature of a fresh challenge than a full scale analysis. Indeed the author apologises at the end of the book for providing only a working sketch of this question. It is true that he has alerted us to the issue but has not given us a treatise on it. The recognition of an issue of such major and perfectly clear dimensions is, itself, an important contribution. It is all the more important since it directs attention to yet another confrontation—much more murderous—between Hindu and Muslim India. It should be quite clear that the clash of ideology between egalitarian Islam and Hinduism was, if possible, even more stunning than that between the Christian West and India. We know all too little of the accommodation that was reached in India between Hindu and Muslim, and Dumont is correct in drawing attention here to a significant major problem for historians and anthropologists.

Dumont follows de Tocqueville in the equation between ideas of ‘egalitarianism’ and rampant ‘individualism’. He writes that ‘individualism’ is itself a powerful idea which must be examined as part of a system of ideas. He argues then that given ‘hierarchy’, there follows a social order of a special kind which curbs ‘individualism’. The ‘individual’ then becomes submerged by social units which surround him. He is in a unit which is above another and below yet another. Dumont can then draw our attention to his Frazer lecture on ‘World renunciation in Indian religions’ (196oa) where he argues, with great cogency, that in the Hindu caste system the individual only regains his ‘freedom’ by denying the connexions which tie him down to his caste. Thus a similarity is posited between the position of the Indian renouncer, the Sannyasi, and the practice of individualism in the West. In these days of the Yippie movement whose members imitate Sadhus, regard themselves as renouncers, and believe in a world of equality to come, Dumont’s ideas seem less far-fetched than they might appear.
However, even though de Tocqueville is convincing when he writes of ‘individualism’ in America, Dumont does not seem to carry us along with the same conviction on the lack of individualism or the reasons for this in India. The comparison with the West and its disrupted, mobile and changing social systems is not sufficiently precise, and a more accurate comparison could be made between Islamic countries and Hindu India. The profound egalitarianism of Islam is certainly a feature of Islamic social relations (especially in the Middle East), but could one argue that there is greater ‘individualism’ (however defined) in the Islamic Middle East than in Hindu India? I think not. The reason is because of a missing link. It is not only caste but also kinship that ties the Hindu to his place in society and curbs the desire to strike out on his own. In the same sense, the powerful and all-encompassing kinship loyalties of the Islamic Middle East keep the individual enmeshed in their nets. Behaviour normal in the West and entirely within the rights of the individual, such as a personal choice of a profession or a spouse, would be seen as egotism among both Muslims and Hindus.

The problem may in fact lie in de Tocqueville’s equation between egalitarianism and individualism. For what de Tocqueville saw in America was a special kind of egalitarianism already linked to individualism. And again the clue may lie in the permissive kinship arrangements of northern Europe as well as in the characteristics of the immigrants who turned to the new continent. The appropriate comparison here may be between the North America of de Tocqueville and the America of the Spaniards and Portuguese which appears quite different.

The confrontation between the West and Hindu India has many facets. An important one noted by Dumont is a disinclination by Western social scientists to take the concepts of hierarchy seriously. Dumont claims that even gifted Western anthropologists have consistently underestimated both ideas concerning hierarchy and the religious roots which nourish these ideas. There is a bias, argues Dumont, not to accept religious ideas as facts but always to see them as an epiphenomenon of ‘material’ facts. When they are reduced to economic, political, or social structural ‘facts’, the Western social scientist feels on solid ground. These are ‘real facts’. As Dumont puts it:

Une autre façon de rester enfermés en nous-mêmes consisterait à supposer d’emblée que la place des idées, croyances et valeurs, en un mot de l’idéologie dans la vie sociale est secondaire et peut s’expliquer par, ou se réduire à, d’autres aspects de la société. Le principe égalitaire et le principe hiérarchique sont des réalités premières, et parmi les plus contraignantes de la vie politique ou de la vie sociale en général (p. 15).

Once more we seem to be at the watershed between Anglo-American schools of empirical philosophy and behaviourism and French rationalism. It is a location which we had earlier visited with Lévi-Strauss.

The reason why Dumont emphasises religious facts as ‘facts’ is because he also draws attention to systems of ideas as the keys to understanding society. Like Lévi-Strauss, Dumont also observes the great interest in the non-ideological, behaviouristic aspects of social life among social scientists. His favourite example is the attempt to see Hindu caste as merely another example of ‘closed status groups’: he pours scorn on this position. Alternatively, Dumont insists on associating behaviour with the ideas that men have which make them behave the way they do. This leads into ideology which, for Dumont, is the ultimate set of principles.
on which a society operates. As he says: '... le système des castes, c’est avant tout un système d’idées et de valeurs, un système formel, compréhensible, rationnel, un système au sens intellectuel du terme’ (p. 53). The principles may or may not be conscious to the actors, but they are susceptible to sociological analysis and they can be observed in behaviour. The attempt of Dumont here is similar to his attempt to discover general principles under the complexity of Dravidian kinship (Dumont 1957b; 1961, etc.).

I agree with Dumont that such principles can be discovered, that they may or may not be conscious, and that they may be expressed in the customary forms of expression of a society, in its religion, its literature and its art. Sometimes one or two key words seem to contain the essential features of a culture. It may be added that the points made by Dumont on ideology and social structure are similar to those of Weber on the role of religious ideologies and social structure. The basic problem in the analysis of society remains the interplay between systems of ideas and systems of action.

There are then two tasks: to analyse the material (behaviour and ideas) in order to arrive at these principles, ultimate values, 'ideology'; then to test how effectively in fact these abstract systems of ideas explain the behaviour of the society in question.

Thus, Dumont isolates the principle of hierarchy as fundamental for the Hindu context. He further analyses this principle into the Hindu opposition of purity and pollution. Hierarchy arises because purity is superior to pollution. Given this formula, the rest of Hindu society falls into place. Or does it? At this point Dumont has to struggle with the many exceptions often reported which appear to negate such generalisations about Hindu society.

It can be seen immediately that a position which links ideology intimately to behaviour makes for serious complications in, for instance, the analysis of social stratification. Dumont has had earlier disputes in the pages of Contributions to Indian Sociology with Professor Bailey (Dumont 1960b; Bailey 1959) and others. He returns to the issue with care and precision. His argument is that such blanket concepts as social stratification, which are close to the heart of social science and which permit wide-scale comparisons, are useless since they are based on mere appearances. Thus, superficially, the United States, South Africa and others appear to have ‘closed status groups’ like Indian castes. But this assertion is really an insult to Hindu India. The social, economic, political and religious factors which are behind the caste system of Hindu India are so totally and completely different from race relations in the United States or South Africa, and the problems which these countries have faced in the past and will face in the future are also so totally unlike, that the attempt to put them into the same abstract category only underlines the bankruptcy of sociological classification. So for Dumont this is mere pseudo-social science which classifies on the basis of appearance rather than analysis. Then can there be no ‘caste’ except on the basis of Hindu ideology? Dumont does make this assertion. He backs it up elaborately by dealing with Lingayats and Jains,
Muslim and Christian ‘castes’. Barth’s paper (1960), which would prove embarrassing, is carefully dissected, but the difficult case of castes in Ceylon is rather summarily dismissed.

Dumont’s argument that Hindu India has a monopoly of what is understood by ‘caste’, turns of course around his definition of caste. He argues that a) concepts of hierarchy based on the purity and pollution model are an essential aspect of caste, b) that this implies the superiority of a group, the Brahman, at the top and some other polluted group at the opposite end of the scale, and c) that this in turn implies the domination of the priests over secular powers (that is, of the Brahman over the Kshatriya). Dumont is not always clear as to which of these features he would regard as the sine qua non of a caste system. In effect, the more he attempts to clarify the definition the closer he gets to a position in which his generalisation can only apply to Hindu India.

In one passage Dumont implies that the Brahman/Kshatriya relationship, so brilliantly observed by Dumezil, is the essence of caste: the ‘priestly caste’ must be separate from secular power and must dominate it (p. 269). Seen in this particular perspective the ‘castes’ even of Ceylon, which are the closest to the Hindu system, turn out to have some critical differences. Dumont draws attention to an important point in connexion with the superiority of the Brahman caste over the Kshatriya. He notes that in classical Hindu theory there is a balance between these religious and secular powers. They are distinguished from each other in absolute terms. But the Hindu Kshatriya king is under the religious jurisdiction of the Brahman. In the medieval period when effective Muslim rule was established over much of India, this Brahman/Kshatriya relationship was broken. The Muslim sultans usurped the position of the Kshatriya kings and would not accept the religious leadership of the Brahmans. Dumont seems to think that this destruction of secular Kshatriya power had the effect of strengthening the position of the Brahman caste in Hindu society. It is a notable point with far reaching implications.

Yet, in another sense, the Muslim domination in the north appears to have weakened some of the features of the purity-pollution ideology, whatever the position of the Brahman in Hindu society. In the south, where Hindu kingdoms with undisturbed Brahman/Kshatriya relations survived politically intact until the nineteenth century, both the pollution concept and caste ideology appear to have been much more powerfully based than in the north.

Dumont’s emphasis on the ideology of caste is especially effective in his chapter on marriage and food. A simple statement that the Hindu castes are ‘endogamous’ is open to dispute. Vexing examples of inter-caste hypergamy are reported from many parts of India. If, however, endogamy is treated as merely the outcome of the interplay of a number of factors and not as part of the essential ideology of caste, then both the question of the boundaries of caste and that of the relationship between the external aspects and the internal relations of the community become susceptible to more precise analysis. Dumont notes that the ideology of hierarchy and the purity-pollution concept do not stop at the boundaries of caste but permeate the entire kinship system. Hypergamy as well as isogamy is a feature of kinship systems, and it is the particular kinship decisions which in effect render castes ‘endogamous’. Hence, ‘endogamy’ can be subsumed under the more general concept of purity-pollution. I agree with Dumont in these views and have
written about Ceylon castes in the same vein without being aware of Dumont’s most recent thought (Yalman 1967).

In discussing caste ranking Dumont gives much importance to the contributions of Mayer (1960), Marriott (1958; 1959) and Pocock (1954). He accepts, in particular, the significant distinction drawn by Marriott of ‘attributinal’ and ‘interactional’ theories of caste ranking. ‘Attributinal’ ranking is defined as the alleged rank order which informants claim for their own and other castes; ‘interactional’ ranks are the conclusions drawn by the observer from actual symbolic interaction between persons. The author examines these concepts in the light of Mayer’s material from Malwa. The two ends of the hierarchy, the Brahman and the Untouchable castes, are not in dispute. In the middle range where ‘dominance’ in secular terms affects ritual ranking there is indeed uncertainty. At this range the ‘interactional’ theory is particularly useful. Castes use many diverse criteria to distinguish themselves from other neighbouring ranks and to claim higher status. The multiplication of different criteria is a function of the number of groups, for to distinguish clearly n number of groups, observes Dumont, n − 1 number of criteria are needed. These are not always in harmony, hence, the difficulty of ranking the middle range of castes on a single systematic scale.

Some of Dumont’s most challenging ideas about caste are expressed in connexion with communal groups in India which are non-Hindu but share the other attributes of Hindu castes. There are closed, endogamous groups with communal names which are often ranked among themselves. There are even Hindu groups which have rejected the Hindu hierarchy, such as the Lingayat, but the position is most delicate in connexion with Muslims and Christians who have, in Dumont’s words, ‘bel et bien’ castes among them. But do they?

Dumont acknowledges the caste-like features but observes that while trapped in a Hindu caste framework, their ultimate values and ideology are turned in another direction. The comparison of the ultimate values of Hindu and Muslim India allows Dumont to write some of his most insightful passages on this much worried but rarely analysed question. At the same time, the consideration of Indian Muslims also brings out one of the important weaknesses of the comparison of ideologies.

Dumont opposes ideologies of Hindu caste and Muslim egalitarianism. There are also contrasts in Hindu and Muslim concepts of purity and pollution. While these concepts have important common points, they differ especially in connexion with food taboos. When the Muslims were politically dominant they lived in peace among Hindu high castes despite the fact that the Hindu codes of food were repudiated. When Muslims fell out of power, a very tense situation developed; according to Dumont it was only a matter of time before the Hindus became ready to reap vengeance for the callous rejection of their rules. The example of meat-eating Hindu groups, such as low castes or even the Kanya-kubja Brahmans as reported by Khare (1966), would not affect this argument very greatly; for such food habits, given the context, are in harmony with the local hierarchy, whereas the Muslim groups were defying the basis of this hierarchy by their very presence.

The problem however is not merely that the ultimate principles of Hinduism and Islam differ. In the Indian context, on the contrary, the real issue is the extraordinary
cultural similarities between Hindus and Muslims. The general ideology may express the polarisation but does not, in Dumont’s definition, take care of the nuances, particularly on the Muslim side. Here what is really needed is a sophisticated concept of culture. It is a fact that Hindus and Muslims share many aspects of their culture even though they differ in their ideology, which makes it sensible to write of ‘caste’ among Muslims. Dumont in fact admits that while caste ideas may be weakened, ‘caste is not absent’ in these cases (p. 266).

We are in the presence of a very curious situation. Here are two societies, Hindu and Muslim, living in close contiguity, deploring each other’s ultimate ideologies, but nonetheless much influenced by a ‘cultural osmosis’ between each other. It is true that we do not know enough about this situation, but in theory there should be no difficulty in describing such a society as that of the Indian Muslims whose culture contains contradictory elements. Surely the idea that cultures are entirely integrated is no more than a heuristic device; and the sooner we start grappling with those cases which are patently less integrated than others, or even contain contradictory elements, the better.

If Dumont is prepared to admit that caste is ‘not absent’ among Indian Muslims, why can he not admit the same for the north-west of Pakistan as described by Barth? The author, while acknowledging the brilliance of Barth’s (1960) analysis, argues that the distinction between status and power (i.e. Brahman/Kshatriya) is absent in this Pathan case. He is correct that in Islam in general the relations between civil and religious authority is a vexed and difficult question. They cannot be simply distinguished from each other. Yet the case described by Barth, as indeed numerous other cases involving tribes from Persia and eastern Turkey, may be special: in all these cases a distinction between religious leaders and secular chiefs appears to be made. These roles seem quite differently conceived, and it may indeed be a matter of the remnants of an Indo-European ideology as Dumézil would have us believe.

If we admit Dumont’s criteria of the Brahman/Kshatriya distinction as the essential feature of caste, then we may have to admit that what has always been described as a caste system among the Sinhalese in Ceylon becomes a problem case. Among the Sinhalese (as indeed among Hindu Tamils in Ceylon) there were no Brahman castes. Yet the rest of the caste system of south India was, in general, present including indeed the very same groups of castes with the very same names and caste occupations as in south India. Also, of course, the entire ideology of hierarchy, of purity-pollution, and of renunciation was (and still is) present. Dumont is dubious about the use of the terminology of caste for this system. Yet even though there are problems regarding the positions of the ‘renouncers’ (the Buddhist monks) and the sacerdotal role of the king, the social fabric is nevertheless made up of groups many of which are identical to those of south India. Once again we are in the presence of a hybrid case in which some key features have been altered (Buddhism) yet other features have remained in the Hindu focus (non-Brahman castes). The case of Ceylon is particularly instructive since so far as is known this particular combination of Buddhism with non-Brahman ‘castes’ has been in existence certainly for almost 800 and probably for 2,000 years.

We would argue, then, that the ideas of hierarchy and the principle of purity-pollution seem more critical for castes as social groupings than the Brahman/Kshatriya distinction.
Kshatriya distinction. Or, at least, the Brahman can apparently be replaced by other superior and pure categories. This is not to deny that the formal distinction between religious and secular power is inherent in Hindu ideology, but only to claim that it may not always be so clearly formulated as in the Hindu caste system, or that it may be expressed in some other form. Thus, since both ideas of hierarchy and the principle of purity-pollution are present among Hindu Tamils and Buddhist Sinhalese in Ceylon, we may say that ‘caste’ is present even though the Brahman is absent. However, the inconsistencies in these cultures regarding the acceptance and denial of caste, and in particular the ideas of the Buddhist monks in Ceylon on this subject, should be investigated with some care: they may give us further insights into the question of cultural integration. Indeed, Dumont himself has provided a good justification for regarding the castes of Ceylon as ‘castes’: he has argued brilliantly that ‘renunciation’ is intimately related to caste society and that Buddhism and Jainism are to be seen as part of the general Hindu pattern of renunciation. What is more natural than to find both caste and the Buddhist monks in Ceylon fully in accord with Dumont’s Frazer lecture?

Dumont’s 1958 Frazer lecture is provided as an appendix in Homo hierarchicus. This lecture has been previously published in Contributions to Indian Sociology (Dumont 1960a) in English. It remains one of the most thought-provoking of Dumont’s attempts to analyse the roots of Hindu religion. It is a seminal work in which the entire and fantastic complexity of Hindu religious expression is distilled into a simple sociological formula. Dumont sees the development of Hindu religious thought as conditioned by a system of castes (caste religion) on the one hand and the rejection of caste (renunciation) by extraordinary individuals, on the other. Both the affirmation and renunciation are cultural forms but much of Hinduism (as well as other forms of renunciation) can be analysed in terms of this tension. It is a characteristically audacious suggestion which demands serious attention.

In other appendices, all previously published in Contributions to Indian Sociology, Dumont deals with the controversy of caste, racism and stratification, with ancient Indian political theory, and with Hindu-Muslim relations. Each essay relates to and expands an important theme in the body of the work. All are tightly argued and useful essays.

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There should be little doubt that Homo hierarchicus is one of the most profound and important contributions yet made to the study of Indian society. We would have expected more precision from Dumont in two respects. First, the caste systems of India are treated in somewhat general terms. There is little attempt made to discuss regional variations systematically. Much of this may be claimed to be outside the scope of this work and a great deal is still unknown, but the north-south differences, important as they are, could have received much more attention. This would have been all the more welcome since Dumont himself is one of the rare anthropologists with intimate fieldwork experience in both regions. Second, there is constant reference to traditional Hindu society and Hindu ideology in the book. Neither the time nor the place for this Hindu past is specified. An impression of general unity and integration for pre-Muslim Hindu India prevails which may
be quite misleading. Again, it is true that the amount of detailed and reliable historical information on Hindu India is indeed meagre, and Dumont has had to choose the most direct path so as not to confuse the reader with historical complexities. There is however less justification for this procedure for the period after the 16th century when we possess relatively detailed evidence on both north and south India. A sketch of the operations of Hindu ideology in a Hindu kingdom in the south as well as a section on the problems of the Hindus under the Moguls would have added precision to Dumont’s observations.

I have discussed some of the more controversial aspects of Homo hierarchicus. It is hardly necessary to point out that the bulk of the work provides detailed, well organised and extremely well documented information on all sociologically relevant aspects of the caste system in India. In the footnotes valuable guidance is provided for the reader’s further research into the issues examined by the author. The bibliography is excellent. There is an index of authors cited as well as a good general index. In the field of Indian studies, Homo hierarchicus supersedes all earlier general and theoretical works on the caste system. It is certain to become a standard reference work essential to students and scholars. It will no doubt be translated into all scholarly languages. An English translation is obviously needed.

Professor Dumont has been best known for his technical, scholarly, difficult and pugnacious writings dealing mainly with south India. The importance of his work is beginning to be better appreciated although his major monograph (Dumont 1957a) still remains untranslated. The lucidity of writing, the clarity of thought, and the extraordinary breadth of scholarship displayed in Homo hierarchicus establishes Professor Dumont not only as one of the most original workers in the Indian field but as a major figure in anthropology.

REFERENCES