
UNIT 17 THE BASIS OF CASTE HIERARCHY: PURITY AND POLLUTION

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17.0 OBJECTIVES

After you have read through and studied this unit you will be able to :

- Describe features of the caste system;
- Discuss the basis of caste hierarchy;
- Outline the notions of purity and pollution; and
- Become acquainted with Dumont's theory of caste.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

Caste has for long been viewed as a distinctive feature of the Indian society. It is not merely an institution that characterizes the structure of social stratification in India. "Caste" has often been seen to represent the core of India. It has been viewed both as an institution as well as an ideology. Institutionally, "caste" provided a framework for arranging and organizing social groups in terms of their statuses and positions in the social and economic system. It fixed individuals into the structure of social hierarchy on the basis of their birth. As an ideology, caste was a system of values and ideas that legitimized and reinforced the existing structure of social inequality. It also provided a worldview around which a typical Hindu organized his/her life.

Apart from being an institution that distinguished India from other societies, caste was also an epitome of the traditional society, a "closed system", where generation after generation individuals did similar kinds of work and lived more or less similar kinds of

lives. In contrast, the modern industrial societies of the West were projected a "open systems" of social stratification, societies based on class, where individuals could choose their occupations according to their abilities and tastes. If they worked for it, in such open systems of stratification, they could move up in the social hierarchy and change their class position. Such mobility at the individual level was impossible in the caste system. Caste has been seen an extreme form of social stratification.

17.1.1 Features of Caste System

G.S Ghurye, a famous sociologist, identified six different features of the Hindu caste system.

- i) **Segmental division of society:** Castes were groups with well-developed life-styles of their own. The membership of the groups was determined by birth and not by choice. The status of a person depended not on the amount of wealth he possessed but on the rank that his caste enjoyed in the Hindu society.
- ii) **Hierarchy:** There was definite scheme of social precedence amongst castes. Each group was given a specific status in the overall framework of hierarchy.
- iii) **Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse:** There were minute rules as to what sort of food or drink could be accepted by a person and from what caste.
- iv) **Civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections:** Segregation of individual castes or groups of castes in the village was the most obvious mark of civil privileges and disabilities. Certain sacraments could not be performed by any caste other than the Brahmins. Similarly, shudras and other lower castes were not allowed to read or learn the sacred scriptures.
- v) **Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation:** Generally each caste considered a particular occupation as its legitimate calling. To abandon the hereditary occupation in pursuit of another, even it was more lucrative, was not considered right.
- vi) **Restrictions on marriage:** Caste groups observed strict endogamy. Members of a caste group married only within their castes. However, there were a few exceptions. In some regions of India, the upper caste man could marry a lower caste woman. This kind of marriage alliance is known as hypergamy.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) List out the features of the caste system. Use about six lines for your answer.

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- 2) Write a note on jatis. Use about five lines for your answer.

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Foundation Stone of a Schedule Caste Village

Courtesy: Kiranmayi Bushi

Interestingly, the term “caste” is not of Indian origin. Its origin has been located in the Portuguese word *casta*, meaning ‘race’ or ‘pure stock’. Also it was outsiders, those who came from the West, who first used the term “caste” to make sense of the social organization of the Indian society. It is currently used as a general term that refers to two different systems of social relations, viz. *Varna* and *Jati*. The *varna* system is a broad framework that applies, more or less, to the entire country. The *varnas* are only four in number, viz. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra (these is also a fifth category of the “untouchables”, who are considered to be outside the *varna* system and are ranked at the bottom of the social hierarchy).

Activity 1

What do you feel are the most important features of the caste system. Note them down and discuss with other people and also with students at the study centre.

17.1.2 The Jatis

The *Jatis*, concrete social groupings of people, differ considerably from region to region. Each linguistic region has a large number of *Jatis*. According to one estimate, there are two to three hundred *jatis* in each linguistic region of India. *Jatis* are relatively small endogamous groups with a distinctive style of life and a specific traditional occupation. Each *Jati* has a name and tends to locate its status by referring to the *varna* scheme of hierarchy. The different *jatis* in a region were arranged in a vertical order. However, unlike the *varna* scheme, the mutual position of *jatis* has been less clear and subject to contestations. Many *jatis* have claimed higher status than assigned to them by others. This ambiguity has been observed particularly in the middle level caste groupings.

There were also cases of upward mobility in the caste system. A lower caste could change its position in the caste hierarchy and move upward by adopting the style of life of a higher caste. M.N. Srinivas, the famous Indian sociologist, called this process ‘Sanskritisation’. However, as has been pointed out by Andre Beteille, it was not merely by adopting the rituals and life style of the upper castes that lower caste could move upwards. Such a process was invariably accompanied by some real improvement in the material condition of a group. However, those who Sanskritised their style of life did not

question the system of caste hierarchy or its ideology. They merely tried to change their position in the system. While individual castes moved up or down, the structure remained the same.

17.2 THE BASIS OF CASTE HIERARCHY

Sociologists and social anthropologists have carried out large numbers of studies on the system of caste hierarchy. Along with defining the system and identifying its features, they have also offered theories that explain the caste system. The process of explanation involves finding answers to questions such as 'why the system of caste hierarchy developed and has survived for such a long time in India? Or 'what is at the base of caste hierarchy?' Different scholars have explained the phenomenon of caste differently. While some locate the origin of the caste system in racial wars, other explain it in economic terms. Still others have explained it by referring to the specific cultural values of the Hindu/Indian society.

17.2.1 Caste and Race

The connection between caste and race was made by some of the earliest foreign commentators on India. They related it to the so-called Aryan invasion of India. They argued that while upper caste Hindus were of "foreign" or Aryan origin, the lower castes belonged to the "native" or "aboriginal" races. Being the conquerors, the Aryans assigned themselves the status of upper castes and those who were conquered were made subjects by the dominant Aryans and were given the status of lower castes. The fact that members of upper castes had fairer skin than the lower castes was cited as a testimony in support of such a hypothesis. However, this theory has been rejected for being purely speculative in nature. There is very little hard evidence to support such an argument. Further, it has been argued that those from the lower castes had darker skin not because they necessarily belonged to a different racial stock but because they were the ones who did much of the physical work in the fields in the open. Moreover, even if it was true that the Aryans came from outside and subjugated the native population, it does not automatically explain the complex reality of caste distinctions and hierarchy. Why did such an elaborate scheme of hierarchy develop? Why did such a scenario not give rise to class type of inequality?

17.2.2 Caste and Occupation

Those who look at caste in economic terms generally do so by referring to obvious fact of the relationship between caste and occupation. Caste, they argue, was a kind of division of labour, different groups specializing in different occupations. Some others see it as a specific form of pre-capitalist/feudal separated from each other in certain respects (caste endogamy, restrictions on eating together and on physical contact), but interdependent in other (traditional division of labour). The word 'caste', not only involved hereditary specialization of occupations but also differential rights. Different occupations were arranged in a hierarchical order that made their occupants socially unequal. Inequality was an essential feature of the caste system. Along with inequality, he also underlined the element of pollution as an important feature of caste. Different groups, in a caste society, tend to 'repel each other rather than attract, each retires within itself, isolates itself, makes every effort to prevent its members from contracting alliances or even from entering into relation with neighboring groups'. Thus Bogue identified three core features of caste system, viz., hereditary occupation, hierarchy and mutual repulsion. Similarly, an Indian scholar, S.V. Ketkar, in his book on the *History of Caste in India*, published in 1909, had emphasized on the notion of purity and pollution being the chief principle on which the system was based.

17.3 PURITY AND POLLUTION

As mentioned above, the theory of caste hierarchy that locates its basis in the notion of purity and pollution is generally associated with the writings of the French sociologist Louis Dumont. He has offered a detailed account of his theory in his well-known book, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*. Dumont has developed a general theory, an "ideal type", of the traditional Hindu caste system. Though he used

ethnographic material (field-work based accounts of the way caste system is practiced) in support of his arguments, his main sources were Indological, the classical Hindu texts. He approached the Hindu caste system from a structuralist perspective that focused on the underlying structure of ideas of a given system. These “essential principles” constitute the logic of a system and may not be apparently visible in its everyday practice. His objective was to develop a pure model that would provide a general explanation of the system.

Box 17.01

Dumont is critical of those who tried to explain caste in terms of politico-economic factors where caste was seen as a system of domination and exploitation. He, for example, criticizes F.G. Bailey, who in his book on ‘Caste and the Economic Frontier’ (based on his field work in Orissa), has argued that there was a high degree of coincidence between politico-economic ranks and the ritual ranking of caste. This is a reflection of the general rule that those who achieve wealth and political power tend to rise in the ritual scheme of ranking. It is what is meant by saying that the ranking system of caste groups was validated by differential control over the productive resources of the village.

Dumont disagreed with Bailey and others who made such theoretical claims because they, according to him, failed to appreciate the peculiarity of the Indian society. These scholars, Dumont argues, tended to look for parallels of the Western society in India, viz., class type social organization. He insists that India and the traditional societies in general were fundamentally different from the Western society. Their social structures needed to be explained with different sets of concepts. Dumont shows how Bailey could not explain as to why the Brahmins were placed at the top of the caste hierarchy. Bailey had recognized the fact that the correlation between power and ritual status did not work at the two extremes of the caste ladder, i.e. in case of the Brahmins (at the top of the caste hierarchy) and the untouchables (at the bottom of the caste hierarchy). Dumont argues that this was not an anomaly but a crucial fact about the caste system.

He suggests that the Hindu caste system needed to be look-at as a system that was an opposite of the West. While the West was a modern society based on individualism, India was a traditional society. The social structures of traditional societies functioned on very different principles and could be understood only in “totality”. It was only through this framework of “totality” or “holism” that a proper theory of caste could be developed.

17.3.1 Modern and Traditional Societies

Unlike the modern societies of the West, the Indian society, or for that matter, the traditional societies in general, were not bothered with maintaining equality of status among individuals. On the contrary, they were concerned with maintaining social differences and inequalities. The ideal of “totality” was more valued in a traditional society than that of the “individual”. Dumont argues that a proper explanation of caste could be worked out only by keeping these fundamental differences between the West and the Indian society in mind.

Caste, Dumont argues, was above all an ideology, ‘a system of ideas, beliefs and values’. It was in the ideological aspect of the caste system that one should look for the essential structure of the Hindu society. It was only via ideology that the essence of castes could be grasped and true principle behind the system could be known. Ideology for him was not a residual factor or part of superstructure, as the term is understood in the Marxist theory. In his framework, ideology was an autonomous sphere and could not be reduced to any other factor or treated secondary to politico-economic factor.

17.4 THE IDEA OF HIERARCHY

Ideology of the system is hierarchy. “The castes”, Dumont argues, “teach us a fundamental social principle, hierarchy”. Hierarchy was the essence of caste. Hierarchy was not merely another name for inequality or an extreme form of social stratification, but a totally different principle of social organization. His notion of hierarchy was almost the same as that of Bogle (as discussed above) who has explained caste by referring to three principles, viz., hierarchy, occupational specialization and mutual repulsion. Dumont

however argues that for a proper theoretical explanation of the system, it was important to identify one common element, 'a single true principle' to which the three features of the caste system suggested by Bougle could be reduced. It was only then that we would be able to uncover the structure of the caste system. Such a principle, Dumont suggests, was 'the opposition of the pure and the impure'.

Box 17.02

Hierarchy, defined as superiority of the pure over the impure, was the keystone in Dumont's model of the caste system. Dumont points out that this opposition underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure, underlies separation because the pure and the impure must be kept separate, and underlies the division of labour because pure and impure occupations must likewise be kept separate. The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites.

For Dumont, castes were not merely ranked hierarchically in a vertical order; they were also mutually related through a system of oppositions, a structure. It was this structure of the caste system that he wished to understand and explain through a study of the classical Hindu texts.

Activity 2

Define the notion of hierarchy and discuss it with other students at the study centre. Note down the main points of the discussion.

17.4.1 Status and Power

Another important aspect of the Hindu caste society in his theory is the specific relationship that exists between status and power. Unlike the modern/Western societies where power and status normally went together, in the caste system there was a divergence between the two. In a typical caste system, those who were the most powerful politically and economically did not necessarily enjoy the highest status in the society. Likewise, those who enjoyed the highest status (the Brahmins) could be economically poor and might have little political clout. The distinguishing feature of caste society was the status as a principle of social organization was superior to power. "Status encompasses power". Unlike the class society, in the caste system, power operated within the framework of status hierarchy.

17.4.2 Dumont's Theory: A Summing Up

To sum up Dumont's theory, we can identify the following core points that he makes:

- The Hindu caste system could not be explained in terms of politico-economic factors. Caste was not just another form of class or an extreme form of stratification.
- It should be explained in terms of its underlying structure of ideas and values, i.e. the ideology.
- The nature of the value system (ideology) and the framework of social organization in the traditional societies were totally different from that of the modern societies of the West.
- The ideology of the Hindu caste system was that of hierarchy. The structure of hierarchy was explained in terms of the dialectical relationship (unity and opposition) between the "pure" and "impure". Pure was superior to the impure.
- One of the core features of the caste system was the distinction that it made between status and power. It was the ideology of hierarchy (that allocated status to different groups in society) that was more important than the material position of a person in the caste system. Priest, at least in principle, was superior to the king.

17.5 CRITICISMS OF DUMONT'S THEORY

Dumont's book *Homo Hierarchicus* has been widely acclaimed as the single most

important contribution to the study of the Hindu caste system. His explanation of caste in terms of "purity" and "pollution" has become a part of the common sense sociology. However, his theory has also been one of the most controversial pieces of work. He has been criticized on various grounds. Among those who have critically examined his thesis and questioned his explanation of caste include scholars like Gerald Berreman, Dipankar Gupta, Andre Beteille and Joan Mencher. They have all themselves been students of the Indian society and have found problems with Dumont's arguments at different levels, empirically, logically, and ideologically. Following are some of the common points that have been raised by different scholars against Dumont's work.

- i) **It does not correspond with the lived reality of caste:** It has been pointed out by his critiques that much of Dumont's theory has been derived from the study of some selective classical Hindu texts. He has ignored the large amount of empirical literature that was available to him, produced by professional social anthropologists in form of village studies and monographs. These monographs provided graphic details of the ways in which caste system functioned at the micro-level. Their description of the system did not confirm his theory. Interestingly, as pointed by Gupta, even when Dumont was aware of the existence of these facts, he constructed them in a manner that their impact was marginalised. Though Dumont explicitly states that his attempt was to understand the underlying structure of the system and not the way caste was practiced in every day life, he nevertheless aspires to make generalizations that have empirical value. He wants us to believe that his theory truly explains the essence of caste.

Moreover, as Berreman rightly points out, caste did not exist except empirically, in the lives of people as they interacted with each other. 'The human meaning of caste for those who lived it was power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honour and denigration, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety. As an anthropological document, a description of caste which failed to convey this was a travesty in the world today'.

Further, Dumont has tried to develop a theory of caste that was supposed to apply to the entire Indian subcontinent. However, at empirical level, there existed significant variations in the system of caste hierarchy from region to region. While there were some regions of India where Brahmins had indeed been considered the superior most, there were other regions where they did not command much respect, such as, in the north-western region of India.

- ii) **Status and power are not independent of each other:** Dumont's theory of caste stands on the premise that in the Indian society, the ritual hierarchy functioned independently of the considerations of power and wealth. This premise has been the most contentious issue among his critics. They find it simply not being applicable to the actual structure of social inequalities in the Indian context. Berreman has, for example, argued that the power-status opposition is a false dichotomy in the context of caste. The two, Berreman insists, went together everywhere and the Indian case was no exception. Power and status were two sides of the same coin. He cites the example of the integration of Gonds, a tribal group into the caste system. They were generally incorporated into the caste system as untouchables. However, in areas where they had retained power in the form of land, they were treated differently. In such cases they were given much higher status in the local caste hierarchy and were called Raj Gonds. Similarly, Gupta has pointed out that 'the rule of caste was obeyed when it was accompanied by the rule of power'.
- iii) **Dumont's theory represents a Brahmanical perspective on caste:** Dumont has been widely criticized for presenting a partial and a biased view of the system. Since his theory was largely derived from the classical Hindu texts, produced invariably by the upper caste Brahmins, his theory allegedly reflected the bias that the upper caste themselves had vis-à-vis the system. It may be worthwhile to quote once again from Berreman. He writes:

Dumont relies heavily on some classical Sanskrit texts while ignoring others, a technique that is inevitable with such sources, but which enables one to 'prove' almost anything one wishes. The result is that he conveys a view of caste which is artificial,

stiff, stereotypical and idealized. It is a view that confirms rather closely to the high-caste ideal of what the system of Hindu India ought to be like according to those who value it positively.

Another scholar, Joan Mencher, who conducted her field-work among the lower castes in Tamil Nadu found that 'from the point of view of people at the lowest end of the scale, caste had functioned and continued to function as a very effective system of economic exploitation.

- iv) **Dumont works with a false dichotomy between the “traditional” and “modern” societies:** Dumont has also been criticized for treating Indian society as being fundamentally different from the West. He works with a much-criticized notion of a dichotomy between the modern societies of the West and the traditional societies of the Third World. His theory is based on the assumption that while the modern societies of the West were characterized by the ideas of individualism and egalitarianism, the traditional societies, in contrast, were characterized by conceptions of the collective nature of man, by the primacy of social rather than individual goals, and thus by hierarchy. As an implication of this, traditional societies like India get represented as knowing nothing about the values of equality and liberty. While traditional societies like India were projected as being closed and unchanging, the West was presented as being progressive and open.
- v) **Dumont’s theory gives no agency to the individuals who practice it:** Dumont’s notion of traditional society is such that it gave no recognition to the individual choice. According to Berreman : ‘The people who comprise the system were depicted as unfeeling, regimented automatons ruled by inexorable social forces, confirming unquestioningly and unerringly to universal values’. Such a notion of the “traditional” Indian society could be easily contradicted by the empirical studies carried out by professional social anthropologists. These studies showed that the Indian people were ‘as willful, factionalized and individually variable as people anywhere else’.
- vi) **Dumont does not acknowledge the social movements against the caste ideology:** Critics have also pointed out that the oppressive side of the caste system and the various oppositional movements against it are not ephiphenomenal to caste, as has been suggested by Dumont. There was a long list of social mobilizations against Brahminical dominance in modern as well as in the pre-modern India. From Buddhism to Bhakti to Sikhism to neo Buddhism, there had been strong, and to some extent successful opposition to the caste ideology. There was no place for such realities in Dumont’s depiction of the Indian society and in his theory of the caste system.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Write a note on purity and pollution. Use about five lines for your answer

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2) Outline some of the criticisms of Dumont’s theory. Use about five lines for your answer.

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17.6 LET US SUM UP

Perhaps no other work on the nature of the traditional Indian society and the Hindu caste system has been so influential as the theory of 'purity and pollution' given by Louis Dumont. Despite its extensive criticism, his book continues to be a must reading for the students of Indian sociology and social anthropology. Though most of his have made valid points, they have not been able provide another theory like the one that Dumont offered. Given his assumptions and methods, he has been able to counter most of the criticisms leveled against his theory.

However, whatever may be the strength of Dumont's theory, it has very little value to in terms of understanding the contemporary context of caste system. The caste today works on very different lines. The political process unleashed by the introduction of democratic institutions and adult franchise has almost completely changed the grammar of the caste system today.

17.7 KEY WORDS

- Hierarchy** : Ordering of society in a rank order from top to bottom, e.g. Caste System.
- Pollution** : A state of mind and body which is connected with occupation and caste and regarded as unclean.
- Purity** : A state of ritual cleanliness associated with caste occupation.

17.8 FURTHER READINGS

Chatterjee, S.M. and U. Sharma, ed., (1994), *Contextualising Caste*, Oxford, Blackwell Publisher.

Dumont, L. 1970, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, Delhi, Vikas.

17.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The features of the caste system are:
 - i) segmental division of society
 - ii) hierarchy
 - iii) Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse
 - iv) Religious disabilities and priveledges
 - v) Lack of choice of occupation
 - vi) Restrictions on marriage.
- 2) Jatis are actual groups of people and differ from region to region. Each linguistic region has two to three hundred jatis. They are small endogamous groups with a specific life-style. The jati locates its status by referring to the varna scheme. Unlike the varna scheme, jatis position in the hierarchy is not completely clear.

Explaining Caste in Indian Society Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Dumont's entire theory of caste rests on the notion of purity and pollution. Dumont developed an 'ideal type' theory and approached the subject from the structuralist points of view and states that the position of a caste in the hierarchy rests on the ideology of purity and pollution of a caste.
- 2) Some of the criticisms of Dumont's theory include:
 - i) It is not lived reality
 - ii) Status and power are not independent each other
 - iii) It has a Brahmanical orientation
 - iv) The individual has no place in it.