HIERARCHY AND APPLICATION: A DUMONT'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of the paper is to explore understanding of hierarchy and application in the frame of reference of Dumont's perspective, in the respect of Indian caste system, as to take into account the assertion that the principle of encompassment, which defines a true hierarchy, is applicable to it as well.

KEYWORDS: *Caste, Hierarchy, Encompass, Isolation, Separation, Hypersymbolism*

INTRODUCTION

A famous and most cited book by Louis Dumont's "*HOMO HIERARCHICUS the caste system and its implications*" in which, Dumont propounded the SINGLE TRUE PRINCIPLE in terms of *ENCOMPASSES, ENCOMPASSED, ISOLATION, SEPARATION* and *BINARY OPPOSITION* for the caste. For Dumont: "A hierarchical relation is a relation between larger and smaller, or more precisely between that which encompasses, and that which is encompassed" (Dumont 1970b:24.). With his definition of hierarchy, Dumont proposes to shift the focal point of accounts that deal with the caste system (Gupta 2014:59). In place of the isolation and separation of castes from one another, which we have found so prominent, we shall bring hierarchy to the forefront (Dumont 1970b:30). But the principle of the system has yet to be ascertained. How should one go about it? In this regard, Dumont writes, "It is enough to observe that actual men do not behave: they act with an idea in their heads, perhaps that of conforming to custom". (Dumont 1970b:40) Further Dumont writes.....the caste system is a state of mind, a state of mind which is expressed by the emergence, in various situation, of groups of various orders generally called "castes" (Dumont 1970b:71). This state of mind provides the orientation towards the whole, which in the eyes of those who participate in it legitimizes their respective positions (Dumont: 1970b149). Moreover, to adopt a value is to introduce hierarchy, and a certain consensus of value, a certain hierarchy of ideas, things and people, is indispensable to social life (Dumont 1970b:54). It is therefore; only via ideology that one can grasp the essence of the castes and come to know the true principal behind the caste system (Gupta 2014:60). The "*single true principle*" is "the opposition of the pure and impure" (Dumont 1970:81).This opposition underlies the caste hierarchy, which can be translated into the superiority of the pure over the impure. This opposition underlies separation because, the pure and the impure must be kept the separate, and it also underlies the division of labor because, the pure and the impure occupations must likewise be kept separate (Dumont 1970b:81). This hierarchical principle, Dumont concludes, is responsible for the "linear order of castes from A to Z………" (Dumont 1970:96). Caste A and Z must exist empirically, for the "two poles are equally necessary, although unequal" (Dumont 1970:93). For the sociologist, Dumont writes, *the decisive step is accomplished once a quality like impurity is attributed in a permanent manner to*

certain people. There, to a great extent will be found the clue to Indian complexity (Dumont and Pocock 1960:16). This is so because, Dumont believes that it "is generally agreed that the opposition is manifested in some macroscopic form in the contrast between the two extreme categories: Brahmans and Untouchables" (Dumont 1970b:84). The next step is to understand what makes this hierarchy a true hierarchy? A true hierarchy "cannot give place to power as such, without contradicting its own principle". (Dumont 1970:117)…….. *But in concrete, we have seen that power, devalued to the advantage of status at the overall level surreptitiously makes itself the equal of status at the interstitial levels. (Dumont 1970:197).* And yet, it is not the interstitial levels, or the median zone, which is important if one is to appreciate a true hierarchy. Dumont categorically states:"For us……..What happens at the extreme is essential."(Dumont 1970:116).In a true hierarchy "that which encompasses is more important than that which is encompassed." (Dumont 1970:197)"For pure hierarchy to develop without hindrance, it was also necessary that power should be absolutely inferior to status "(Dumont 1970:114).

The caste hierarchy, however, is not merely a linear order but is "a series of successive dichotomy and inclusions," (Dumont 1970:106). For instance, the Shudra is opposed to the block of the first three castes; Vishay's are opposed to the block the Brahman and Kshatriya, which finally divides into two. (Dumont 1970:79) In this manner, Dumont demonstrates again the relationship between the encompassing and the encompassed.

The above, most briefly, are the essential methodological points that Dumont makes in connection with the understanding of what constitutes a pure hierarchy, and why the caste system should also be considered as such. (Gupta 2014:62).

It is necessary to take into account the contributions of at least Murray Milner (1994) and Michal Moffat (1979). Milner, in a vein reminiscent of Dumont argues that status cannot be equated with power or wealth (1994:147). Further, as status is in expansible (i.e. if someone goes up then somebody else somebody else must come down), if a lower caste climbs up, the upper caste must come down (1994:57, 71,112,160).As the caste system according to Milner, centralizes ritual status (1994:58), the position of the Brahman is virtually unassailable. This conclusion leads Milner to undermine social mobility, and over-value inheritance and ascription (1994:205)

Milner assumes, as Dumont did before him, that caste system has been devised by Brahmans (1994:78) while the other caste simply has acquiesced to their position in the hierarchy. The fact that a "lower caste may successfully demonstrate a "superior" lifestyle and yet not to be accepted by Brahman and, conversely, that an "upper" caste may not, and most often, does not carry intrinsic legitimacy with subordinated castes, does not find the place in Milners analysis.(Gupta:2014:62).

From a Dumontian perspective again, but this time very self-consciously, Michael Moffat argues that caste rule are so thoroughly internalized that lower castes replicate the hierarchy at subordinate level as well. Moffat believes that even at the level of the "untouchables" hierarchy is clearly evident. The "higher" member of the scheduled caste dominates the "lower" level breaks down, it is because "of an exhaustion of material resources of low human unable to pay others, and of other human willing to serve them (1994:148). In other words, caste domination is wrought by material resources and not by spiritual, ideological and ritual compliance. If it were latter than the caste system is primarily ideology, and acceptance of it purely voluntary. This is as Dumont argues consistently in *Homo Hierarchic us*. Dumont's principle of ritual hierarchy operates on two levels, the opposition between the Brahmin (as the very epitome and essence of purity) and

the "untouchable" (as the carrier of impurity); and between the Brahmin (as the figure of sacred/ritual status) and the king (as the figure of the temporal/secular power). Since the pure always necessarily encompasses the impure, at least at the level of the ideology (if not at the level of the fact), the Brahmin is placed at the top of the hierarchy. And, this is so not only in relation to the progressively receding states of less purity (or more impurity) as embodied in the person of other castes, but also in relation to the king or the holder of the temporal authority.

The caste system has conventionally been perceived by scholars as a hierarchy, based on the binary opposition of purity and pollution. Challenging this position, leading sociologist Dipankar Gupta argues that any notion of a fixed hierarchy is arbitrary and valid only from the perspective of the individual castes. The idea of difference, and not hierarchy, determines the tendency of each caste to keep alive its discrete nature, and this is also seen to be true of the various castes which occupy the same rank in the hierarchy. For Dipankar Gupta "the caste system as a form of differentiation wherein the constituent units of the system justify endogamy on the basis of putative biological differences which is semaphored by the ritualization of multiple social practices." (Gupta 2014:141). By rituals we mean, all those social practices that are valorized and upheld irrespective of Weber's "means-ends" rationality. Providing fresh insight, Gupta exhibits two further characteristics which cannot be seen as its essence but may be understood as its properties. These properties are *Hierarchy* and *Hypersymbolism*.(Gupta 2014:142).The discrete character of caste is maintained by the enhanced valuation that members of caste place on their own customs, ritualized practices, and genealogical heritage. This should, and does imply a value-loaded scale which places different caste at different position in the hierarchy. It is true, as Bougle said that Hindus are obsessed with the right to be organized hierarchically (Bougle 1991 :25), yet it needs to be recorded that it is not as if there is a consensus on the hierarchy .(Alfred Nandy's observation in Rowe 1968:205) ;Gupta (2014:142)

The caste system is often considered to be a graded hierarchy based on the purity-pollution scale. Firstly, the hierarchy that the caste system poses can be seen as uniform and universal. The truth is that, there is no agreement over who should occupy which position in the hierarchy. It is not as if the Brahmans are universally acknowledged in Hindu India to be the most superior community. There is a powerful Kshatriya or warrior castes that consider themselves as the most superior castes, and belittle both the Brahmans status and occupation, while there is an overall agreement that castes should be hierarchized, there are strong disagreements regarding the positioning of jatis of the same status.

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