

SESSION NAME: HIERARCHY AND CASTE

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Hierarchy and Social Stratification

One of the notions which expresses the idea of inequality in a specific way is the notion of hierarchy, which has characterized the caste system. In anthropological theory the notion of hierarchy has been associated with a concrete society and projected onto a place: India and Indian civilization (Appadurai 1988; Srinivas 1984). In what concerns hierarchy and caste, what was underlined was the difference, the uniqueness of this phenomenon in relation to other forms of inequality, namely “Western” ones. Given this focus on difference, caste was therefore considered by many authors as something other than simply a variety of social stratification taken to its extreme degree.

Louis Dumont (1966), the main representative of this tendency, saw the caste system essentially as a system of values and ideas, based on the opposition between purity and impurity. These key symbolic concepts would bind the whole system insofar as they underlie three of its main characteristics:

- 1) a division of labour in which pure tasks must not be performed by the same people who deal with impurity or polluting substances;
- 2) a separation of a certain kind between castes because impurity is contagious (thus the restrictions concerning inter-caste marriage, for example, or food circulation);
- 3) the hierarchical order, because purity is superior to impurity. The two ends of the ranking order would be the Brahmans and the former Intouchables or Dalits, who would represent the pure and impure as symmetrical categories.

However, according to Dumont this opposition of purity and impurity would be fundamentally of a religious nature and the hierarchy it sustains would be relatively

independent of the materialities of wealth and power: power would be located not at the top of caste hierarchy but in the middle, in the intermediate ranks of status and prestige. The cast system would thus be anchored in hierarchical thinking and in a holistic ideology, where the whole encompasses and supersedes its constituting elements. This hierarchical and holistic ideology was contrasted by Dumont with the egalitarian values and the individualism prevailing in “Western” modern ideology.

According to this view, the concept of caste would therefore be indissolubly linked to a specific reality and it would be misleading and unrigorous to use this notion as a general adjective to describe whatever sharp manifestation of inequality, or as a synonym of extreme social stratification no matter where, as it is often the case in Western common perceptions and in the media. This perspective, which sustains that the label “caste” is unsuited to travel the way it did and should not be used as a simple equivalent for inequality in its most rigid form, was also the perspective of Edmund Leach (1960), but for different reasons. The criteria that established the specificity of the caste phenomenon would be not so much of a cultural nature (religion, values), for many Buddhist Sinhalese, for example, as well as other neighbors of India, would also organize themselves in castes, even though they are not of Hindu religion.

The criteria of specificity would be social and structural, not cultural. As a phenomenon of social morphology, the pan-Indian fact of caste would present specific characteristics which would mark them out both from class societies and from aristocracies. Those characteristics would be such as:

- 1) caste interdependence, as in an organic-like system (each cast would fill a distinctive functional role, which entails a tight complementarity between them);
- 2) the absence of competition among casts, although it exists within the cast (a characteristic that stems from the specific system of labour division). This would also

mark out caste society from class society. In class societies, “the capacity of the upper-class minority to “exploit” the services of the lower-class majority is critically dependent upon the fact that the members of the underprivileged group must compete among themselves for the favours of the élite” (Leach 1960:6). According to Leach, the reverse happens in caste society. “Economic roles are allocated by right to closed minority groups of low social status. Members of the high-status dominant caste, to whom the low-status groups are bound, generally form a numerical majority and must compete among themselves for the services of individual members of the lower castes” (ibidem);

3) the external relations of castes would exclude in principle kinship links of all kinds, although economic links are tight). Kinship relations are exclusively internal because of caste endogamy, that is, castes ideally do not intermarry. Apparently this is similar to hereditary aristocracies that also tend to adopt endogamic behaviour and to this same dichotomy between kinship relations and economic relations. However, in the case of aristocracies this behaviour is essentially confined to the ruling clique, and aims at distinguishing and insulating the superior groups from the inferior ones. In contrast, in a caste system caste behaviour pervades the whole society (Leach 1960: 9). The same rules apply to those at the bottom as to those of the top

From Castes as System to Caste as Identity

The interrogation of cast as an expression of inequality generated a number of debates like this one. As is the case with others, the difficulty lies in being able to identify the specificities of a phenomenon without exoticizing it. The exoticization consists in a comparison which focuses solely on the differences of other societies, without focusing enough on similarities.

This was precisely one of the criticisms aimed at Louis Dumont and other Indologists. Brahmano-centrism was another. Contrary to what they stated, there would be not one undisputed ranking system, but several clashing views of hierarchy linked to the identity of each caste. No caste would consider itself intrinsically inferior to others, nor part of a single, overarching hierarchy in which each caste participates in upholding the system as a whole (cf. Gupta 2005). Such an interpretation is very likely to have rested on an overvaluation of the Brahmannical version of hierarchy, which is precisely the one that emphasizes the criteria of the pure and the impure. But, as scholars have suggested more recently, the Brahmannical justifications of superiority and inferiority would not be of a different nature, nor sociologically more valid, than the mythical narratives of other castes which refer themselves to their glorious past and claim their own superiority based on it. According to this critical perspective, what happened was simply that the Brahmannical version was the one that caught the eye of Indologist scholars. Contrary to what was stated before, there would be tension and political competition instead of endorsement or ideological acquiescence of the less privileged castes in their subaltern status.

But in addition to these problems of perspective that may have affected Indianist studies, it is nevertheless necessary to also consider other reasons for the invisibility of the contestation that surrounded the hierarchical order. Those reasons concern a historical mutation, the economical and political transformations that occurred in contemporary India. If the invisibility of conflict over hierarchy prevailed before, this was also due to the fact that caste relations unfolded for a long time only within the limits of the closed village rural economy, which was dominated by an agrarian landed élite and didn't allow much leeway for the subaltern castes. These castes could not project what they believed for fear of reprisal, nor could they assert their status claims. The

breakdown of this economy in many parts of India, the rural exodus, democratic politics and the juridical changes inscribed in the Constitution of independent India, which promoted greater equality, together with the multiplication of caste organizations, all of these factors contributed to enable contestation out in the open as well as competition in wider arenas. It is in this context that scholars such as Dipankar Gupta (2005) sustain that castes now manifest themselves more as identities rather than as a system. In other words, the collapse of the caste system as it existed in the closed village economy was followed by the rising assertion of caste identity in the national political arena. This is so also because caste politics today is not so much about ending caste, but about using it as an instrument for social change. This means that democracy has brought about a vocal caste assertion, but this has not resulted in contesting the category of caste as such. On the contrary, the vertical consolidation of caste along the purity hierarchy has been replaced by a horizontal consolidation of these categories (Sheth 2002).

Literature Cited and Recommended Background Reading

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