

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives

Dr. Santhosh R

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

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Sociology of Louis Dumont: Homo Hierarchicus I

Welcome back to the class. We are beginning our discussion about Louis Dumont and his classic work *Homo Hierarchicus*, a very important, provocative and fascinating work. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this revolutionised Indian sociological endeavour to understand the caste system. Because the framework was different. Louis Dumont was not an Indian Sociologist; he was a French Sociologist. Through his work and the introduction of a structuralist perspective, he significantly questioned the existing scholarship on the caste system in India. It created quite a lot of reverberations, discussions and debates within the Indian sociological scenario. He also established a very important procedure, the *Contributions to Indian Sociology* with Pocock. He set the tone for a very different kind of Sociology in India. So, we might spend four lectures on Dumont and *Homo Hierarchicus*. It is a very elaborate discussion of *Homo Hierarchicus*. Moreover, before that, let us see who the person was.

This is one of the pictures of Louis Dumont and one of the titles of the cover pages of his work *Homo Hierarchicus*, the caste system and its implication. This is an English edition, and *Homo Hierarchicus* was first written in French. After around 4 years, it was published in, 1966; it was written in French and in the 1970s, it was translated and first made available in English. It is not a very easy book, not easy in terms of the language used, the way of argument, its writing style, and the structure of the book. It was all new, creating ripples in the Indian academic scenario. It was criticised vehemently and celebrated by many people, and it was appreciated for its incisive insights. It was severely criticised for its inherent biases. Nevertheless, any scholar, any student of the caste system, and any student of Indian society cannot be oblivious to this particular work, or they cannot dismiss *Homo Hierarchicus*, or they cannot dismiss Dumont because his contribution is something so monumental. After all, as I mentioned, he rewrote how Indian society in general and the caste system, in particular, was understood.

So, these are some of his important works. His works include *Homo Hierarchicus*; it is a French name, from Mandeville to Marx, the *Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology* and another book which is again written in French, which, if translated the name means *Essays on Individualism and Anthropological Perspectives on Modern Ideologies* in which he contrasts Holism with Individualism. As he was a French scholar he basically tried to communicate with the French people, and especially this book, *Homo Hierarchicus*, is basically he has kept the French audience in mind, and this book is written for them. That is very interesting, and we will discuss it.

Throughout this presentation, I depend primarily on T. N. Madan's summary and elaboration of Louis Dumont. Almost every material I use in this PowerPoint is taken from this essay, "Louis Dumont and the Study of Society in India". This essay has appeared in multiple volumes, and the one I have taken is from his book *Pathways*, which I mentioned in the previous class. *Pathways* is a book that was edited and written by T.N. Madan and chronicles the pathways of Indian sociology. So, he has elaborate essays on Srinivas, D.P. Mukherjee, and Louis Dumont. So, this essay is a very interesting introductory essay that summarises Louis Dumont because *Homo Hierarchicus* is not a very easily accessible book.

It is not considered to be a very easy book, unlike *Remembered Village*, which we discussed. As I told you several times, *Remembered Village* was a very easy-to-read, novel-like book with vivid descriptions of the singular village. The writing style was also very engaging. Whereas *Homo Hierarchicus* is more dense, more theoretical, its approach was unorthodox.

T.N. Madan gives you a chapter-wise summary of this essay and then ends with criticism. T.N. Madan and his essay is the most important source for me. Now, Dumont is a scholar of international renown who is equally at home in the domains of Sociology, Social Anthropology and Indology. The subjects on which he has written have an impressive range and include Hinduism, caste, kinship, marriage, kingship in ancient India and social-political movements in modern India. So, Dumont was a structuralist. He did extensive ethnographic work. He collected materials from Tamil Nadu. The Kallars were one of his central important, you know, the caste he studied, Pramalai Kallars. He was adept at ethnographic work and an expert in Indology. He had enormous command over Sanskrit, and he used the data from the field. Now, when we look into the trajectory of different approaches, the earliest approach was the Indological approach, which heavily favoured the text or the Sanskrit language or the material written in the Sanskrit

language. These indologists never cared about what field data meant. I am talking about people, not a host of, armchair theorists or the typical Sanskrit scholars, both foreign and Indian, who relied only on the ancient scriptures or the Sanskrit text, basically to understand Indian society and to say that these books hold the key to understanding the Indian society.

G.S. Ghurye is an exciting combination of both. He did empirical work and collected data but was also a Sanskritist. After Indology, when it comes to the Marxist framework, they have the slightest regard for anything that is connected with the old text. They completely deny that, and their focus is on the material dimension and the economic dimensions of society. And when it comes to structural functionalism, they are again coming from the social anthropological tradition. They also neglected the Indological or the Sanskrit text, and rather, they privileged the field data. And Srinivas is the best example. Maybe his understanding of knowledge about Indian scriptures could be very peripheral. He was not a Sanskrit scholar; he might have been able to read and understand it, but he was not considered a Sanskrit scholar himself. His expertise was not in analysing the ancient text or other things; instead, he advocated a field view. I hope you remember this book view and field view. Srinivas presents it as a kind of binary, the opposite of the book and field views. Srinivas always preferred the field view. The essay that we discussed, Varna and Caste, is an excellent example of how he argues that the book view can be misleading.

The Varna scheme of Indian society and the Indian caste system are very misleading. Instead, fieldwork is important. And when it comes to structuralism or when it comes to people like Louis Dumont, you see an exciting combination of both. Dumont heavily depends on Sanskrit texts, and he also makes use of data. Methodologically, it is a rejection of the mere empirical approach, and it is also a combination of both the ideological and structural-functionalist approaches and the ideological and empirical approaches. They do not dismiss Dumont and other scholars or dismiss the Empirical approach, but they argue that the Empirical method or Empirical data is not alone. You need to make use of the Empirical method, or in other words, they would argue that the Empirical data will begin to make sense only when you understand the kind of deeper structure in which they are implicated. They say you get these deeper structures from the ancient texts. Or the ancient texts, hide, or they would exhibit the ancient, the deeper structures and the Empirical data that you collect would only illuminate that. So, this is an important methodological intervention. So, Dumont intervened decisively in the theoretical and

methodological aspects of Indian society in general and caste in particular.

He was a founder of *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, which was established in 1957. As I mentioned, it was and continues to be, the most important sociological journal in Sociology published in India. Later, he worked along with Pocock to fulfil that and establish it. Later, they stopped the publication, and then a host of others, including T.N. Madan, took over the publication of this journal because it was seen as a very important journal exhibiting the scholarship on Indian society. So, they started it as a new series later. The fundamental argument of Dumont, the reason it was titled *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, was that you need to have a sociology for India, the sociology of India. So, Dumont was unconvinced or unhappy with the way Indian society was theorised. He believes that Indian society is somewhat unique and needs to be explained on its own merit.

Many of the concepts used from the West or other places might be inadequate to understand Indian society. So, the primary claim or the primary intent was to create a Sociology of India. What appeals to me most was not only the acknowledgement that the people being studied might have points of view but also, in fact, more so the affirmation that these points of view, the principles that the people themselves give, must be taken seriously and even treated as fruitful points of departure of anthropological inquiry. This is something quite important. So, he argued that. This is quoted in Madan's essay, but it is his own quotation. What appeals to me most was not only the acknowledgement that the people being studied might have points of view but also, in fact, more so affirmation that these points of view, the principle that the people themselves give, must be taken seriously and even treated as fruitful points of departures for anthropological inquiry. So, he was of the opinion that many times, the ethnographers or the anthropologists come from outside with a preconceived theoretical framework, and then they use only the people's reactions, arguments and ethnographic data to explain their own position; only these frameworks. And they were less receptive to people's own stories, people's own points of view. According to Dumont, there was a reluctance among anthropologists to give more seriousness or more credence to the arguments of people about their own lives. How people explain their own lives was seen as a kind of ignorant expression about themselves.

It requires an expert like an anthropologist from outside to tell people that what they are experiencing is this. So, he had a very serious ideological and intellectual problem with that kind of a tendency within Anthropology. So, Dumont and Pocock had at the same time pointed out the

distinctiveness of the anthropologist's method, which lay in attempting to see things from within as integrated into the society which he studies and from without, that is, as a collective representation as well as social facts. Now, interestingly, Dumont is not somebody who thinks that people know everything about their own society. There are two extremes; one extreme is your general suspicion or general idea that people do not understand how they live; you need an explanation and an expert opinion to say that. Another extreme is that the way people talk about their society is the reality, and you go by that. And as a sociologist or anthropologist, your duty is to reproduce whatever the native people say, and then that is what reality or knowledge production means. Dumont and Pocock were unhappy with either of these positions, especially the former, because that was the most prominent one. They argued that the distinctiveness of the anthropological method lies in the attempt to see things from within as integrated into the society he studied and from without. So, he argued that you need to pay attention to see how people make sense of their own lives and take it seriously.

Whatever insights you gather from here are important, and you also need that to understand how society works, a kind of insight from outside. And this insight from outside is mostly his understanding of the structural foundation of every society. That is why he brings in structuralism. When he began to study Indian society, Dumont argued that how Indian society exists whether it is caste system, kinship system or kingship system, all these things need to be studied. But these things must be supplemented by the more significant, deeper, structuralist understanding of society, which may be available only to him as an expert in this field. He believed in combining both the knowledge from within and the knowledge from without. *Homo Hierarchicus* was published first in French in 1966 and later translated into English in 1970s. And even this very term is exciting. It is *Homo Hierarchicus*, and you might be immediately reminded of similar terms. *Homo Sapiens*, *Homo Neanderthalensis*. These are all terms that are used for indicating different species and then *Homo Fabae*.

So, many different terminologies are used to describe the entire human species. *Homo sapiens* is a term used to give a precise definition to human beings. And *Homo Fabae* is another term that is used to provide us with another specific definition of human beings. For Dumont, this *Homo Hierarchicus* is something to say that is very, very constitutive and is a central theme of human beings. And that is the reason why he titled his book *Homo Hierarchicus* and not *Homo Equalis*. *Homo Equalis* is the argument that human beings are all equal. The French Revolution's famous

argument is that every human being is equal, even though we know that it is only a utopian idea. On the contrary, Dumont is building up the argument, or Dumont is arguing that homo, the very essential nature of human society, is Homo Hierarchicus. One refrain of Dumont in this book is that The Western scholar's definition of caste as a type of social stratification is ethnocentric. They must, therefore, liberate themselves from their preconceived ideas, such as egalitarianism, individualism, and the preeminence of politics and economics in the society in which they are trapped.

So, as I mentioned, this book Homo Hierarchicus was written keeping the French audience in mind. So, his very first chapter, the introductory chapter, is a dialogue with the French people, saying that because we are French, we think that equality is one of the fundamental features of society. We believe in individualism, equality, and rights. All these things might give you a skewed understanding of human society, but you must also understand other values. So, if equality is a value, he argues that the hierarchy is another value. You only understand the value of equality if you understand the value of hierarchy. In some societies, hierarchy is also an integral structural value, a significant value. So, to understand hierarchy and equality, you need to understand hierarchy. So, he argues that every society, especially French society, must appreciate other competing values, and he claims that many of the theories used in Sociology and Anthropology are Eurocentric and ethnocentric. Ethnocentric is a fundamental concept in sociology that tells you that you tend to formulate your own ideas based on the concepts of your own value orientations. So, you are not able to say something like the vegetarian people looking down upon non-vegetarian people. It is an ethnocentric approach. You think that vegetarian food is superior, and thereby, you form the opinion that everybody who consumes non-vegetarian food is inferior. That is an example of ethnocentric or white people believing that you know all people of colour are inferior people. And when it comes to Europe, you know that most of the social sciences, mainly Sociology and Anthropology, were founded in Europe. So, most of the theorisations within European Sociology are Eurocentric. They were derived from the particular socio-cultural and historical context of Europe as a whole.

One of Dumont's refrains in this book is that the Western scholar's definition of caste as a type of social stratification is ethnocentric. He was critical of the British scholars or the Western scholars' characterisation of the caste system as stratification. Stratification is a system in which people are placed in different strata with a notion of inferiority and superiority. It is a vertical

stratification. So, the people at the top are always considered privileged, and those at the bottom are always disadvantaged. This involves particular notions of inequality, suppression, exploitation and many other things. And this is how you know the caste system was understood when the Britishers came in. They understood it as a ruthless and inhuman way of treating other humans even though they were practising slavery there. So, there was a series of attempts, you know, by the colonial government to mitigate these inhuman practices and practice of untouchability and discriminations and other things. So, Srinivas says that this tendency to look at caste only as a system of stratification is very myopic. It is very superficial. Instead, it is much more profound. They must, therefore, liberate themselves from their preconceived ideas, such as egalitarianism, individualism, and the preeminence of politics and economics in the society in which they are trapped. So, he argues that an average scholar of Sociology or Anthropology from the West is completely trapped in the idea that egalitarianism must be the most important value for every society and every society individually is the most essential element, not the collectivity. For every society, the utilitarian dimensions of Economics and Politics are the most important, not the ideas and the religion. So, he is making that argument very clear. He is reprimanding the British scholar or the Western Anthropologist and Sociologist for being ethnocentric in their approach. Caste, which undoubtedly stands for inequality in theory and practice, should not be interpreted as a notion that is the opposite of equality and, therefore, an anomaly or, worse, a perversion.

The caste system is a particular type of inequality, and the sociologists' principal task is to lay bare its nature. So, this is again a quote by Dumont. He argues that caste undoubtedly stands for inequality. It is a kind of inequality because you know that the caste system comprises different, as we have discussed in the case of Ghurye. The caste system immediately accompanies exclusions of various forms of privileges and restrictions on different people on the base of their birth, their access to public services and then food and other things are restricted, and jobs and everything are restricted.

So, undoubtedly, it is connected with inequality in theory and practice. In practice, it should not be interpreted as a notion that is the opposite of equality. The caste system should not be seen as a mere opposition to inequality and, therefore, an anomaly or, worse, as a perversion of society. The caste system, he says, must be understood in its own right. There is an inner logic behind how Indian society is arranged in a specific manner that is different from how other societies are

arranged. There are particular reasons for this, as well as logic and rationale. The task of an Anthropologist or a Sociologist is not to condemn all these practices or to brand all these practices as uncivilised or unequal and other things and to dismiss them instead, to try to intellectually understand how it work or what is the inner logic behind this particular system. Therefore, it is an anomaly or, worse, a perversion. The caste system is a specific type of inequality, and the sociologist's principal task is to lay bare its nature. So, the disparity, Dumont agrees that the caste system represents a kind of inequality. However, this inequality is very different, and sociologists must understand it.

Again, a quote from the book *Homo-Hierarchicus*, the idea which means the people express are related to each other by more fundamental ideas even though these are unexpressed. Fundamental ideas go without saying and have no need to be distinct; that is tradition. Only their corollaries are explicit. The caste system, for example, appears as a perfectly coherent theory once one adds the necessary but implicit links to the principle that these people themselves give. That is a compelling argument. So, what is he saying? He says the most fundamental principles are not explicitly stated for every society. The most fundamental principles need to be explicitly articulated. They go without saying. You do not need to reinforce or re-articulate them. You do not need to remind people about that. The most fundamental things go unarticulated, unannounced. The ideas people express are related to each other through more fundamental ideas, even though they are unexpressed. So, for Dumont, the most fundamental ideas of every society lie deep hidden, deep buried in their thing, which may not find its own expression in the outside world.

Fundamental ideas go without saying and have no need to be distinct; that is tradition. Only their corollaries are explicit. Only how certain elements seem to need to come out and then make themselves bare and visible to others. The caste system, for example, appears as a perfectly coherent theory once one adds the necessary but implicit link to the principles that the people themselves give. So, if you look into how a caste society works, Dumont would argue that there are specific rules and regulations.

There are specific obligations, rules, and certain ways in which people are arranged. There are notions of superiority and inferiority. There are elaborate rules and everything. So, for Dumont, these rules themselves are not sufficient to understand. Instead, these rules only reflect a much deeper, larger structure. How people interpret their own experiences and understand their own

society only indicates a much larger structure that lies beneath and behind these observable things. The caste system is an excellent example of how Levi-Strauss viewed mythology or kinship. Now, Dumont is also proposing to look into these things by trying to go deeper into them. We will stop the class here and then meet for the next class. It is a continuation, and we will have two more classes on this book. This introduction may be sufficient for today's class, and we will continue the discussion in the coming class. Thank you.