

**Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives**  
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**Week-07**  
**Lecture-35**

Criticisms of Louis Dumont

We conclude the seventh week by looking at structuralism as an important theoretical framework for understanding Indian society and the caste system. In the last four classes, we had a very elaborate discussion on structuralism in India and, more specifically, on Louis Dumont, one of the most important sociologists of Indian society. We looked at his magnum opus, the *Homo Hierarchicus*, in detail. Hope you remember that Louis Dumont and his theoretical intervention, especially the introduction of structuralism as a theoretical framework, was a very radical departure from the conventional ways in which Indian society and caste system were understood. So Dumont introduced structuralism as a very innovative theoretical framework and, to a large extent, kind of dismissed the existing theoretical and methodological framework, saying that these scholars have not understood the most fundamental structural elementary aspects of Indian society and that is typical of every structuralist intervention.

And no wonder Dumont was subjected to a host of criticisms because this kind of theorisation was quite new. Almost every Indian scholar engaged with the question of Indian society and caste system had to engage with Dumont. They had a series of debates with Dumont both directly and indirectly. For example, T.N. Madan organised a conference to discuss his work and the disagreement. So, almost every scholar of repute in Indian society had to critically engage with Dumont's arguments. So that is the very reason why we consider Louis Dumont and this *Homo Hierarchicus* as one of the most influential works on the Indian caste system because, for any student of Sociology or caste system, Louis Dumont is somebody who cannot be ignored. So what are the major criticisms levelled against Louis Dumont? So, that is what we will look at in this class.

Among various scholars who have written, one of the most notable criticisms against Louis Dumont is provided by Gerald D. Berreman titled *The Brahminical View of Caste*, and this essay is also included in the book edited by Deepankar Gupta titled *Social Stratification*. So it is quite readily available. I also include some criticisms levelled by T.N. Madan at the end of the class.

So, let us look at Gerald Berreman's criticism of Dumont. You can see that this title itself is very provocative. He says what Dumont presents is a Brahminical view of caste, and Berreman accuses Louis Dumont of providing an ideological and theoretical justification for an oppressive system like caste. So, let us examine the specific criticism Berreman presents. The first is the assumption that there is a clear and consistent universal and fundamental disparity between what the author terms traditional or similar societies, such as India and modern ones, such as France. He says it is a problem. Dumont believes that societies like the French are modern and harbour ideologies like egalitarianism and individualism, whereas societies like India are more traditional, where collectivity is important. That is why he called for a sociological apperception to understand that society. Berreman finds an issue with this fundamental division of society into these two categories. Dumont finds that traditional society is to be characterised by conceptions of the collective nature of man by the primacy of social rather than individual goals and the hierarchy (by which he means ritual hierarchy based on purity, pollution, and opposition). Modern societies are characterised contrastively by individualism and, hence, egalitarianism, the antithesis of hierarchy, and this is a familiar concept to all of you. We have been discussing that.

Dumont begins with this basic assumption that these societies are very different at least in the observable empirical dimension, because the French have a deeper commitment to egalitarianism and individualism. In contrast, less developed or traditional societies like India are more collective in character. So he says to what extent Dumont could escape the ethnocentric viewpoint. Does Dumont believe that individuals are as submerged by Indian society, as submissive to it, as conformist to its ideologies as this book implies? If so, how can he reconcile this notion with first-hand experience in India, where all empirical studies have demonstrated people are willful, factionalised and individually

variable as people anywhere else? It is a very fundamental question.

Berreman accuses Dumont of being Eurocentric because this is a very old trope. Again, this is a very old colonial trope that the British are the land of modernity and individualism, whereas India is the land of collectivity and traditionalism. Because there is no individualism in India, there is no individual in India. Everybody is a part of a village, a religion or a caste, and people cannot think individually. So, this was a very important assumption. Berreman questions Dumont on this account, asking if Dumont believes that individuals are as submerged by Indian society, as submissive to it, as conformist to its ideologies as this book implies. So, does he think that the people he met in India are submerged or submissive to the collective force of Indian society? If so, how can he reconcile this notion with his first-hand experience in India? And a person like Dumont must have conducted very intense fieldwork in India. So Berreman is asking, is it what Dumont came across in India's society as people have completely subsumed and submissive to the kind of a collective force in India as willful, factionalised? So, has he not seen anybody as a person who is willful or factionalised rather than individually variable like people elsewhere?

The second major criticism that Berreman raises is that power and economic and political factors are distinct from an epiphenomenal to caste and that ritual hierarchy is a central fact of caste independent of power. Berreman says that I would assert that power structure opposition is a false dichotomy in the context of caste.

These two are inseparable. So Berreman again finds fault with Dumont's fundamental assumption, and let me repeat it. This is a point which was heavily criticised or the most heavily criticised part of the Dumontian scheme, and people like Deepankar Gupta, people like almost every other sociologist, have criticised Dumont for providing a kind of deterministic soul significance to this ritual purity or what he calls it as a pure hierarchy based on religious ideals and religious values as a defining and determining factor of caste society. So I hope you remember that Dumont is very assertive in his characterisation that the caste system is constituted based on the ritual hierarchy, which is religious, and that is a core ideology that constitutes the opposition between pure and

impure. All other important forms of hierarchy, like economic condition or political power, are epiphenomenon and are not the real constituent character of caste society.

Berreman, like many other people, vehemently opposes this formulation. So, the power status opposition is a false dichotomy in the context of class. These two are inseparable. Dumontian formulation is the opposition between pure and impure and the disjuncture between status and power. So, this latter disjuncture, according to Berreman and others, is a false one.

My objection in this regard is not to the injustice Dumont has done to the analysis of his academic peers but to the injustice he has done to the people of India. 2000 years of struggle to escape the oppression of their status by that caste system cannot be dismissed as the projection of socio-centric Western scholars. More than that oppression can be justified by Sanskrit text known only to elites. The oppression of caste and the attempts to overcome it are not epiphenomenal to caste. They are an integral and inevitable part of that.

Dumont is also being criticised for being soft on the consequences of the caste system. Berreman argues that this kind of objection that everybody in India, every party in India, every person in India subscribes to this kind of an ideology, to this pure ideology and any opposition to that is not something a part of this Indian society, something very objectionable. So, he says it is not only the injustice Dumont has done to the analysis of his academic peer but also the injustice he has done to the people of India. 2000 years of struggle to escape the oppression of the status by those caste system deprived cannot be dismissed as the projection of socio-centric Western scholars any more than the oppression can be justified by Sanskrit text known only to the elites. So, in this particular argument, he says that providing this kind of scholarly justification is highly problematic.

The oppression of caste and attempts to overcome it are not epiphenomenal to caste. They are an integral and inevitable part of that. Then he says Dumont almost fails to recognise caste for what it is on an empirical level. Institutionalised inequality guaranteed differential access to valued things in life. So, Berreman argues that the most

fundamental dimension of the caste system is that it is an institutionalised system of inequality.

It is an over-pervasive system, a very comprehensive system that institutionalises inequality and divides resources into different strata based on people's birth in a particular segment. So, the most empirical level caste system, its side effect is the institutionalised inequality guaranteed differential access to valued things in life. Because you are placed in a particular hierarchy, you are meted out with a specific form of redistribution, and the most important values are also given to you based on your relative position. Then, he chides Thomas O. Beidelman for confusing inequality with exploitation.

Dumont notes that he failed to see that the system assures subsystems to each proportionately to his status. So this is a way in which Dumont justifies the stratification, this arrangement, this hierarchy that the system assures subsystems to each proportionately to his status.

This is the problem. It assures life, comfort, health, self-respect, food, shelter, learning, pleasure, security, education, legal redress, rewards in the next life, rewards in the next life and all of the other necessary and valued things proportionately to status. And that is what exploitation is. That is what oppression is: providing for those at the top proportionately to the status and at the expense of those at the bottom.

So, ritually superior people would be given proportionately on a higher scale than people at a much lower level. So it is not only the kind of ritual or religious respect that is accorded but almost every other essential aspect of your life that defines the quality of your life, that defines the life chances that are distributed according to your relative position. So almost everything, including comfort, health, self-respect, food, and shelter, is distributed based on this relative position.

The third point of Berreman's criticism is the notion that caste occurs only in India and is not subjected to cross-cultural comparison. Incomparability cannot only be deduced or refuted by knowledge of both phenomena, but the complementary ignorance of Cox and Dumont does not add up to a convincing argument.

In the last class, we mentioned that for Dumont, the caste system is something that is exclusive to Indian society, and that is how he argues that the nature of Indian society is different, and Berreman finds fault with that argument. He says that you cannot rule out comparison until and unless you actually venture into this analysis in a comparative framework and then come up with the possible similarities and differences, and only after that will you be able to rule out this possibility of comparison. The fourth criticism concerns its limited, biased, albeit scholarly source of evidence upon which the arguments are based. So this is again highlighted by almost everybody, including T.N. Madan, Deepankar Gupta and almost every other scholar who argues a particular kind of theorisation adopted by Dumont. So, Dumont does not come to theorisation based on available evidence. So, that is how one particular kind of theorisation works. You arrive at a theory based on the material at hand. On the other hand, being a structuralist, Dumont prepares a theory.

Dumont comes up with a theory and then tries to establish that theory and its authenticity by bringing in convenient facts. Many anthropologists and sociologists have pointed out that there are so many examples and contradictory evidence available from rich ethnographic studies that have come up from India that go against Dumont's basic argument. But he dismisses all of them as an epiphenomenon, an unimportant thing that these people are not ready to agree on. So 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. So this is the problem with any textual analysis or reliance on these ancient texts, which can be quite flexible regarding their ability to offer explanations.

He attends surprisingly little to the expansive empirical literature on village and caste in India, which emerged during the post-independence era, including much of which appeared before the writing of the book's first edition in French 1966. So Berreman, like many other people, criticised Dumont for ignoring the abundant ethnographic material collected by fellow scholars and selectively choosing the required arguments or context of the material from the scriptures. A reliance on scriptures and then trying to argue a

point is much easier as scriptures are amenable to multiple interpretations and explanations, and they contradict each other many times. So, that is a very highly sensitive way to make a theory. So, the result is that he conveys a view of caste as artificial, stiff, stereotypical, and idealised.

It is a view which confirms rather closely the high caste ideal or what the caste system of Hindu India ought to be like, according to those who value it positively. It confirms the theory of caste pervading well in learned Brahminical tracts. So that is the most damning, devastating criticism levelled against Dumont. What Dumont ultimately did or did through his work *Homo Hierarchicus* was to present a very nuanced, sophisticated, theoretical and ideological justification for the Brahmins. He provided a Brahminical explanation and a Brahminical theory about the existence of castes. Why should the people at the top be respected? Why must they be separated from others? Why should there be endogamy? Why should there be a division of labour? Why should certain people be identified as always doing all the defiling jobs? While the others must be rescued from that? So, Dumont beautifully explains all these things through his theory.

For example, if you look into the question of manual scavenging. Manual scavenging as a practice existed in India; it still exists, though it is officially outlawed. Manual scavenging is a system in which the upper caste people cannot think about the excreta they produce. So their only obligation is to go in the morning or whenever they want to relieve themselves, and what happens to that human excreta is not their headache. There is a system in place, and other sections of the population go to their houses every day, collect this human excreta, and then dump it elsewhere. So these people are saved from doing this defiling job. So is the case with the death of an animal. The dead body might be started rotting, which might be very difficult to dispose of. So, there are sections of people who will do this diligently. So, such an arrangement, what Dumont did, according to Berreman, was given certain kinds of justifications, such as a more sophisticated justification through this analysis. Thus, Berreman calls this book a Brahminical view of caste, even though Louis Dumont was not a Brahmin.

Now, coming to T.N. Madan's criticisms. What distinguishes this work from the usual social anthropological discussions of caste is that it does not proceed from fieldwork to a model of how the system works. His theory-building was very different and distinct from conventional methods. Instead, it begins with a cardinal explanatory principle, that is, hierarchy and boldly sets out to build a model of its own, maintaining throughout the position that theory or ideology overrides and encompasses ethnography. The same preoccupation and the consequent devaluation of the ethnographic datum also bothers some of Dumont's critics. They complain of his cavalier attitude towards empirical evidence.

Allmost every scholar were critical of this very dismissive attitude of Dumont towards empirical evidences that was contrary to his project or contrary to his argument. Veena Das and Uberoi. J.P. Uberoi and Heesterman also acknowledges the importance of Dumont's work, but they express doubts about the adequacy of his use of the structuralist approach and, therefore, of his model. Das and Uberoi would like the pure impure dichotomy replaced by the more inclusive opposition between the sacred and the non-sacred. Veena Das is another important scholar who used a structuralist approach in her early work to study Indian society. So they suggested that the pure and impure may be too limiting character, and rather, they wanted the categories of sacred and the non-sacred as this one.

T.N. Madan argues that the question of social change, how does Dumont address this? Madan acknowledges that Dumont's theory is insufficient to provide an adequate explanation of social change. Dumont constructs a model of traditional Hindu society. It is to be presumed that the structure evolved. However, It is unclear at what time Dumont believes that the crucial structural element of the caste system, as presented to him, has crystallised. Once the crystallisation took place, all further changes were ruled out.

This is an interesting aspect of the caste system and the structuralist explanation. If you go by the structuralist explanation, it makes you believe that society has some deeper, undetected structural character, which was there from the beginning. While society's



peripheral or superficial aspects change, the core remains the same. If that is the case, the question is when these structural changes come into the picture because the caste system, as we know, has a very specific historicity. There is no mention of caste during the Vedic period. So, there is widespread acceptance that the caste system existed almost 2000 years ago.

So, if that is the case, how did that society undergo such dramatic change to the extent that the very structural element of society transformed? Dumont is dismissive of the changes. He says it is a change of the society, a change in the society and not the change of the society. So he is typical that structuralists are not ready to understand how society undergoes change. So these are the major criticisms levelled by many scholars, including Berreman.

Then there is a criticism by Kugli, Dipankar Gupta and his work on Continuous Hierarchies and Discrete Caste. Almost every scholar started critically engaging with Dumont because that was such a powerful intervention. It created a lot of controversy, created a lot of new work on Indian society and that is why Louis Dumont and homo hierarchicus continue to be some of the central figures or central points in the study of the Indian caste system.