

Caste(s): Through the Archetypal ‘Orientalist’ Predicament of Sociology on India

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Abstract

This article interrogates the articulations on the concept of caste(s) by digging its origin, pathways and the good fortune it enjoyed since its birth with a brief appraisal of Dumontian notion of caste. The paper also makes an attempt to show how the stereotype of anthropological ‘other’ as an integral part of colonial epistemological and ontological thinking provided the basis for analysing caste as ‘other’ which became the be-all and end-all category for explaining Indian social reality and, which again in its turn have orientalized Indian sociological imagination subsumed under Social Anthropology and Indology. The paper shows how caste and sub-caste have no direct correspondence with Varna or Jati. And, finally, Dumont’s views on caste and hierarchy in India are unsubstantiated as Dumont turns speculative into empirical and empirical into speculative in the distinguished company of Anthropological/Orientalist tradition of Hegel, Marx and Weber. The need of the hour is to critically look at the dependence on caste for explaining reality in India. The paper calls for a more appropriate and reflexive classifications based on theoretical-methodological rigor and in-depth study of Indian society without resorting to Eurocentric and Colonial biases.

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Introduction

As early as 1980, D.N. Dhanagare reminded us that the 'academic concerns' of the Indian sociologists were 'complacently wallowed' in studies of caste, tribe, village, marriage, family and kinship and thereby stereotyped the contexts of research (1980: 28). Almost a decade after a somewhat similar concern was expressed by Meenakshi Thapan while she was taking stock of the scope and character of Indian sociology published in the journal *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. She wrote in no uncertain terms that there is remarkable 'thematic continuity' between the Old and New series of *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 'in terms of substantive articles' as the good old issues of caste, kinship and religion dominated the other themes (1988: 268). Satish Deshpande echoed similar opinion when he wrote in 2001 that the present sociological discourses about Indian society are still dominated by and large with the notion of 'caste' which, in turn, create disciplinary predicaments for Indian sociology (2001: 247–60). Even in 2012, Jodhka writes, that, 'the subject of caste has been a staple in the courses on society and culture(s) of India taught in the Sociology departments of colleges and universities across the country' (2012: xxii). In fact, as Roland Inden so aptly remarked that India was consistently represented as radically different from the societies of Europe, an essentially static society of which caste was the defining social institution (1990: 49). Analysts on caste starting with Max Weber (1864–1920), Celestin Bouglé (1870–1940) via the British colonial censuses at the last quarter of 19th century and reaching its pinnacle with Louis Dumont's (1911–1988), theory of caste, indubitably confer this impression that the concept of caste(s) have been at the centre in understanding and explaining Indian society for about one and a half century. Thus, caste has been omnipresent and if one wants to understand India the best short cut route was to understand caste.

If a plain truth is told then this riding of the same bicycle of caste has been a characteristic feature of both Sociology on India and Sociology of India. Despite the fact that the discourses on caste(s) have done 'intellectual and

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administrative overtime' (Sharma, 2002: 10), for an elongated period ranging from unquestioned and/or qualified/modified acceptance to slipshod orientation(s) along with parroting of the works done on caste(s) by overlooking the historical and etymological trajectory and roots of the concept of caste since its particular propitious (?) modern/colonial ontological beginning. This article attempts to commemorate (just passed) birth centennial year of Louis Dumont (1911–1988) by interrogating some of the articulations on the concept of caste(s) by digging its origin, pathways and the good fortune it enjoyed since its birth with a brief appraisal of Dumontian notion of caste which is distinguished by both rise and fall. In this paper I also make an attempt to show how the stereotype of anthropological 'other' as an integral part of colonial epistemological and ontological thinking provided the basis for analyzing caste as 'other' which became the be-all and end-all category for explaining Indian social reality. Moreover, historically, in India, the customary practice has been to use the label 'sociology' to refer to both sociology as well as to social or cultural anthropology. The twinning of the disciplines testifies that by and large, anthropology, especially its colonial variety has dominated sociology, to the relative neglect of the latter. Thus the disciplinary terrain of Indian sociology has been profoundly influenced by colonial discourses of anthropology and a specific category of anthropological imagination. This article demonstrates how this penetration has been coupled with another significant baggage i.e. the Orientalist approach with which Indian sociology has been overloaded with and how Caste as an integral part of this saga generate mayhem by giving birth to discourse(s) which at best can be labeled on the one hand a potpourri of loose ends and, on the other, a classic post-colonial predicament still hanging though sometime loosely with the colonial umbilical cord.

What is *Colonial Anthropology Plus 'Orientalism' = 'Oriental Other'*

Without the Rest... the West would not have been able to recognize and represent itself as the summit of human history 'The other' was the dark side-forgotten, repressed and denied; the reverse image of enlightenment and modernity. (Hall, 1995: 314)

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What is unique about anthropology as a discipline is the use of its 'other', to overcome the limits of its origin and location. (Das, 1994: 24)

As a discipline born with the patronage and sponsorship of colonial administration, anthropology's survival has depended on the idea that there are other cultures with differences (mostly negative) and that they can be studied. Traditionally, the anthropologists ventured into remote villages to study them, the 'other' people with the 'other' culture. Anthropologists' assumed ability to thoroughly study cultures unlike their own has made anthropology the study of the human other. It is a logical corollary of the discovery of the 'primitive' i.e. un- or non-civilized human beings as opposed to 'civilized' ones. Historically viewed, the development of the Enlightenment worldview, the growth in scientific reasoning, the rise of evolutionary thinking, and most importantly the rise of colonialism are closely associated with the appearance and usage of the notions of the 'other' and 'otherness' the favorite knowledge categories of the classical anthropological discourse. Anthropology, owing its ontological start from Colonialism was implicated in 'inventing the human other', which is basically also 'epistemological' for developing a 'theory of mankind'. Thus 'the notion of perceived differences' proven through the cognitive process of observation, collection of data' and finally of course 'theorizing' for generating notions of 'a plethora of other' (Sarukkai, 1997: 1406).

With the rise particularly of Colonialism and contact with 'other' cultures, a specific pattern of thought and language, a system of representations emerged, underpinned by the discourse of the 'West and the Rest' where the 'West' became synonymous with the developed, civilized, and normal in contrast to the 'non-West' which was perceived as underdeveloped, primitive, and deviant. This essentialist identity of West/Europe was then formed not only through its perceived sense of difference from the other cultures, but also by its perceived sense of superiority to 'other' cultures. This kind of 'Eurocentrism' – the perception of almost everything European as normal, natural and ideal – in the hidebound heyday of colonialism became crystallized into common sense. Consequentially a number of negative stereotypes of the

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'other' emerged. Social theorist Hulme points out that stereotypes operate mainly through a combination of adjectives which established characteristics as if they were essential truths and are always split into two opposing elements

– a good and a bad, which is known as 'stereotypical dualism' (Quoted in Hall and Gieben, 1995: 308). This stereotyped dualism is clearly reflected in Eurocentric binary oppositions such as these:

White	Black
Noble	Savage
Culture	Nature
Christian	Heathen
Evolved	Primitive
Differentiated	Simple
Developed	Backward
Refined	Rude
Civility	Barbarism
Modern	Traditional
Rational	Irrational
Dynamic	Stagnant
Active	Passive
Progressive	Conservative
Men	Women
Self	Other

This, of course, does not exhaust the list of binary stereotypes. As Edward Said has shown that 'Orientalism' is a discourse about the Orient as the 'other' of Europe, which by all means confirms Europe's ethnocentrism, in spite of all its refined pluralities. Since in Orientalism 'orient' is always a tableau of queerness, 'there is nothing about Orientalism that is neutral or objective. By definition it is a partial and partisan object' (Sardar, 2002: vii). Accordingly, in a profound sense, the other is not a concept, not a name for something or

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someone. It does not name an object. It is used as an indicator towards that which is noticeable only by its absence' (Quoted in Hall, 1995: vii).

Implications of Orientalist Paradigms and Theories of Difference and Otherness

These anthropological and Orientalist paradigms and theories of 'difference' and 'otherness' had far-reaching implications for Indian sociology. Let me very briefly substantiate Indian sociology's anthropological connection in the post-independent period which is quite impressive and deserves mention. In the first volume of the *Sociological Bulletin* in 1952 M.N. Srinivas (1916–1999) wrote an article on 'Social Anthropology and Sociology' where he enthusiastically commented that the experience of intensive fieldwork has chiefly made social anthropology a respected and respectable academic discipline. Therefore, Srinivas thought, 'it would be a good idea if we could insist that students wishing to study "sociology" make a prior study of "social anthropology" for at least two years'. This, for him, 'provides a cure to ethnocentrism' as it is certainly capable of producing a 'certain charity and tolerance towards ways of life other than one's own'. In addition, Srinivas was also eager 'to do away with the distinction between sociology and social anthropology' as 'this would help to separate social from physical anthropology and ethnology'. In the first or last instances he argued that 'the union of social anthropology and sociology is desirable and will be to the advantage of sociology' (Srinivas, 1952: 35–37). It becomes evident from Srinivas' position that he was very anxious to separate social anthropology from anthropology as the latter at that time has fallen into disgrace especially in the former colonies. He candidly admitted that 'names are an important matter, and social anthropologists have reason to feel that their subject has not been lucky in the choice of its name' (ibid.: 32). But apart from the nomenclature, apparently nothing else about 'anthropology' was really objectionable to Srinivas and he was eager to have 'comparative sociology' and eliminate the distinction between social anthropology and sociology' (ibid.: 36). Almost faithful adherence to this guidance of Srinivas and also of some other Indian sociologists beyond doubt, explains why there was no real



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resistance to any of the domain assumptions of Colonial Anthropology and/or Orientalist paradigmatic worldview of Indian Sociology in the first three decades after independence. Although interrogation of these articulations are in progress mostly from the last decade of the last century but, these paradigms are still popular among majority academics and the binary stereotypes dominate daily teaching of sociology in Indian colleges and universities, and thus reproducing the archetypal predicament. A close inspection is bound to attest that Indian sociology, both in its curriculum and in its majority researches still uncritically uses and depends on these worldviews. As Deshpande unmistakably wrote that in contrast to Economics, 'Sociology seems to have inherited a profoundly ambiguous and disabling self-identity. This is a direct consequence of the fact that it lacked a distinct presence in colonial India, being largely subsumed under Social Anthropology and Indology' (2001: 205). Beteille, who was also convinced up to 1970s about the unity of sociology and anthropology as advantageous for sociology expressed a somewhat different feeling in the 1990s. He wrote: 'It is undeniable that my enthusiasm for the unity of sociology and anthropology has cooled over the last thirty years. This is partly because changes in my own professional experience and intellectual horizons, but also because of changes in the two disciplines themselves'. In this connection the following narration of Beteille is unquestionably indicative of the fact that, despite colonialism's formal disappearance and flowing of much water down the rivers Ganges and the Thames about the deconstruction of binary opposites and essentialist categories, the 'Otherness' paradigm reigns supreme, though often invisibly as an archetypal post-colonial predicament.

When a student of Indian society and culture goes to such an (American) University, no matter whether he is a sociologist or an anthropologist in India, he is presented there as an anthropologist and not a sociologist. The established opinion in American, and to a large extent European, universities is that the study of Indian society and of other Asian or African societies is the province of anthropology and not sociology. (Beteille, 1993: 301)

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Thus, the 'orient' is still the 'primitive others', as it remains so also in somewhat Anthropologized/Orientalized Indian sociology. Here, it may not be out of context to mention that in the last quarter of last century, Jacques Derrida (1976), wrote about how Western philosophy is based on binary opposites, such as truth/falsity, unity/diversity or madwoman, whereby the nature and primacy of the first term depends on the definition of its opposite (other). This emphasis on dualities and difference has led Derrida to call for a dismantling or deconstruction of meaning/discourse. This approach has discarded the universal, simplified definitions of social phenomena, arguing that these definitions essentialize reality and fail to expose the complexity of life as a lived experience. This approach emphasizes local, specific and historically informed analysis of different realities, the importance of difference and the pitfalls of universalizing essentialism (Derrida, 1976; Culler, 1982).

In this context let me draw attention to the first volume of the *Contribution to Indian Sociology* (1957). It is here one can clearly find that Louis Dumont and David Pocock were all quite ready to start a special sociological analysis of India's society under the heading of 'For a Sociology of India'. Further, they wanted to have 'genuine dichotomies' in place of what they called 'imaginary dichotomies', of course to prove the principle of difference between the West and India or in their respective social systems (1957: 16). In fact, Dumont assigned the sociology of India the task of standing at the 'Sociology's and Indology's point of confluence' (ibid.: 7). But was it a matter of developing sociology for India or was it an issue of inventing Indian sociology in a definite way (Lordinois, 2013: 344)? British anthropologist Bailey accused Dumont and Pocock of equating Indian sociology with an analysis of the values of Hinduism. He also inquired 'whether there was also an Indian chemistry' (Bailey, 1959: 39–40). It was clear that the underlying hypothesis behind Dumont's social anthropology was to limit India to a cultural specificity that could not be reduced to a generic model of universal type, which is of course reserved for Dumont's perception of Europe/West. For Bailey, Dumontian

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analysis was certainly not true comparative social science. On the other hand, for Patricia Uberoi, it was wrong to dismiss Dumontian variety of sociology as merely 'Hindu sociology', when in fact Dumont's intellectual project was surely comparativist par excellence (Uberoi, 2006). But what was really Dumont's idea of comparative sociology, especially outside the parlance of *Contribution to Indian Sociology*?

As opposed to modern society, traditional societies, which know nothing of equality and liberty as values, which know nothing, in short, of the individual, have basically a collective idea of man and our (residual) apperception of man as a social being is the sole link which unites us to them, and is the only angle from which we come to understand them. This apperception is therefore the starting-point of any comparative sociology. (*Homo Hierarchicus*, 1980 [1966]: 8)

What's more, this is what Dumont wrote in the Preface of his book *From*

Mandeville to Marx: Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology (1977):

At the end of my book on India, *Homo Hierarchicus*, I outlined what was to be my next task. It was to consist in reversing the perspective and throwing light on our modern, equalitarian type of society by contrasting it with hierarchical society. This might be done in a book called *Homo Aequalis*... . It so happens that this society (Indian society-BB) appears in stark contrast, regarding its values, to the modern type of society. (1977: 3)

Quigley is quite on target when he asserts that Dumont uses India as a particular representation of traditional society and as a mirror to explain what it is that makes for the distinctiveness of modern society. This, Quigley believed was Dumont's genuine preoccupation (1993: 22). Hence, the stereotypical dualism of Dumont can hardly be put under the rug in the name of 'comparative sociology' and then conveniently overlook Dumont's real objectives. Otherwise Dumont would not have presented *Homo Aequalis* to one group of readers and *From Mandeville to Marx* to another group of readers though the latter is the supposed translation of the former (Beteille, 2006: 111). But there is no dearth of following in Dumontian type of understanding of caste as well as no scarcity in criticizing Dumont's version of caste. What is lacking though is a comprehensive challenge to this colonial anthropological

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conception of binaries which make sociological imagination in India as Yogendra Singh felt long back 'imitative than innovative almost by nature' (Singh, 1968: 25). In all honesty, Indian sociology might have been benefited if there was legitimate disciplinary amnesia of successive generations of Indian sociologists (Beteille, 1997: 98) which could have helped them to be innovative rather than imitative and prevented in taking things for granted by riding the same bicycle over and over again.

Before I go to the next section on caste per se let me refer to Jaganath Pathy's article in *Sociological Bulletin* to demonstrate how particular words matter historically and epistemologically. He so accurately points out that the term 'tribe' has never been defined with any scientific rigor in spite of its prevalence in social science literature. He asserted that the term 'tribe' actually originated with European colonialism and racist ideology. It cannot be construed as accidental and that only in the heydays of colonialism most people were designated as tribes (1999: 98–9). For Pathy, it was indisputably,

colonial subjugation that transformed nations, countries, kingdoms and peoples into the so-called tribe. Prior to colonial annexation, the term had no equivalent in Africa, Asia, Australia or America. It is not merely accidental that only in the heydays of colonialism were most of the people named tribes. The term tribe reflects the vocabulary of the colonial powers which, over laden by the 'Whiteman's burden' described it in several disparaging and contemptuous terms. (ibid.)

It was therefore the inescapable fate of caste, tribe, etc. to be the classic 'Oriental Others' fulfilling the prophecy and the in/unintended consequence of colonial anthropological and orientalist imaginations of perceived difference.

From Other to Parenting and Nurturing of Caste

My argument is about the power of colonial leviathan to produce caste as the measure of all social things... . Under Colonialism, Caste was thus made out to be far more – far more pervasive, far more totalizing, and far more uniform – that it had ever been before. (Dirks, 2001: 8 & 13)

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Karl Marx (1818–1883), although did not discuss caste but started writing on India with two objectives in mind: one, the assessment of the role of British imperialism in colonial India; second, and more importantly, the construction of an empirical and logical antecedent and direct opposite in India or, for that matter, the Orient/Asia of any or all of the modes of production (e.g. ancient, Germanic, feudal and capitalist) that originated in Europe (or synonymously the Occident/West). Marx also insisted on explaining course of Indian history by 'indigenous, not imported categories' (Bhadra, 1989: 1&91) which evidently meant that there are European categories which are for Europe only and Asia cannot have any claim to that and two shall never meet. Max Weber in his *The Religion of India* (first published in 1916–1917) proclaimed that the caste is the most fundamental institution of Hinduism. For Weber, 'before everything else, without caste, there is no Hindu' (Weber, 1964: 29). Forty years later, Dumont and Pocock in their clarion call for the appropriate kind of sociology of India declared that 'first, of course, comes caste' (1957: 17). This is really an enthralling and impressive historical continuity between the new and the old Orientalists although it may be a fact now as Appadurai reminds us that 'Dumont's work may be the last major work to make caste the central problem of Indian society' (1986: 745). It seems both Dumont and Pocock never cared to explore that their position of identifying caste as the fundamental institution of Indian society, however, begs a series of unavoidable theoretical and methodological questions which may be pertinent for pursuing such a caste-based analysis of independent India.

To begin with, for example, what can be said about the very word 'caste'? Before everything else let me locate its original birth place, its etymological root.

The Portuguese seafarers who traded mainly on the west Coast of India in the 16th and 17th centuries described the groups they called castas (from which derive the English and french words caste) meaning 'species' or 'breeds' of animals or plants and 'tribes', 'races', 'clans' or 'lineages' among men. (Marriott and Inden, 1985: 348)

Two points are in order here. First, the word 'caste', which has captivated and captured so much of our 'sociological imagination' is not an Indian word.

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To be sure, it is rather an European invention. Secondly, castes are in a basic way 'unlike – as species are'. That is to say, jati or caste can be species in a zoological or botanical sense also' (Quigley, 1993: 4). The onerous responsibility of popularizing and stabilizing the word in the Indian psyche was borne by Max Weber with the necessary help from the British Colonial administrators and the so-called colonial anthropologists cum administrators. Weber's sole source on castes in India was in fact the British Indian censuses of 1901 and 1911 (Weber, 1916/1964: 29 & 344 notes). As far as the British 'official' view was concerned, Bernard Cohn provides us an excellent testimony of the 'official British view' of caste which was very much linked to how British gathered the information about the caste system. For British, in the first instance, a caste was a 'thing', an entity, which was concrete and measurable, above all it had definable characteristics – endogamy, commensality rules, fixed occupation, common ritual practices, regarded as the popular three line theory of caste. These, by the way, were things which supposedly one could discover by sending assistants into the field with a questionnaire and which could be considered authentic enough for reports and surveys. Alternatively, one could learn about the castes of a particular district by sitting on one's horse or in the shade of the village banyan tree as the adjunct of one's official duty. Thus, the recorded facts could be collated to pigeonholes like the Lothars, or the Ahirs or the Santals, etc. This could go on infinitely and the British administration did have the satisfaction or the illusion of knowing the people of India. The 1901 census of Bengal found over 205 castes and 2000 odd castes in India. No doubt, India was thus seen as a collection of castes; the particular picture was different in any given time and place, but India was a sum of its parts and the parts were castes (1987 [1994]: 154–56). This grossly empiricist and simplistic view of the caste system of India nicely fitted into Weber's problematic and was further accentuated one-sidedly in conformity with his own methodological prerequisites.

Now, as far as the British were concerned the classification of castes under the census of 1901 was based on 'social precedence' because apparently it was 'so recognized by the native public opinion at the present day' and because the particular castes were 'supposed to be the modern representative of one or the

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other of the castes of the theoretical Hindu system' (Quoted in Mukherjee, 1958: 321). This procedure, clearly making caste as of central importance, was unfortunately adopted. This was despite the fact that if a person was asked to identify his caste he would invariably have referred to anything from his occupation to some titular designation he might have earned. Risley himself acknowledged this (Ghurye, 1969: 278). In any case the result of such classification was extraordinary livening of the caste spirit, along with the mushrooming of caste groups and bodies. This, as James Kerr, the principal of Hindu College at Calcutta wrote in 1865, was clearly conducive to the British interest:

It may be doubted if the existence of caste is on the whole unfavourable to the permanence of our rule. It may even be considered favourable to it, provided we act with prudence and forbearance. Its spirits is opposed to the national union. (Quoted in *ibid.*: 285)

Mr. Middleton, one of the two superintendents of census operations of 1921 for the province of Punjab, later correctly pointed out the effects of British colonial rule on the revival and consolidation of caste in India. He wrote that the classification of occupational castes were largely manufactured by and almost entirely preserved by the British Government. He categorically stated that the British land records and official documents were responsible for exacerbating the rigidity of the castes.

We pigeonholed every one by caste, and if we could not find a true caste for them, labeled them with the name of a hereditary occupation. We deplored the caste system and its effects on social and economic problems, but we are largely responsible for the system we deplore Government's passion for labels and pigeonholes has led to a crystallization of the caste system, which except amongst the aristocratic castes, was really very fluid under indigenous rule. (Quoted in *ibid.*: 281)

Unlike its predecessors in England, the censuses of British India attempted not only to count but also to define and explain caste. As a result, the censuses became not simply an accounting of what existed; they also become active participants in the creation and modification of 'Indian society'

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i.e. a congeries of castes. Its obvious consequence was the successful creation of caste as the 'other' which nobody could locate anywhere in Europe or for that matter in whole of the West. The additional bonus was also the birth of a plethora of human 'others' through numerous castes, sub-castes, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, etc. The 1901 census of Bengal along with 205 castes was able to discover 450 groups from one to 22,000,000. Half of them did not have over 1,000 members (Cohn, 1987 [1994]: 155). The situation boils down to the fact that almost there were as many castes as there were individuals. Lewis Mclver, the Madras census commissioner for 1881 noted about difficulties in addressing caste enumerations. The numbers of castes swelled from 3,208 in 1871 to 19,044 in 1881, a clear indication of a difference in method rather than the growth of caste groups. Mclver noted elsewhere in his report that the difficulties created by the overlapping of 'caste', 'sect', and 'locality' have defeated the purpose of the returns. With passing of years 'castes have been so infinitely multiplied that, even if there were any recognized principle of precedence, the nuances of rank would be so slight', that the places of the several castes could not be differentiated. 'Except the members of the admittedly degraded and depressed castes, each Shudra thinks, or professes to think that his caste is better than the neighbour's Wealth means social pre-eminence in the India of 1881, nearly as much as it does in England' (Mclver, 1883: 102 & 108. Emphases added). In any case the result of such a classification was extraordinary revival of the caste spirit and mushrooming of caste bodies. This procedure, clearly making caste as of central importance, was adopted despite the fact that caste has become meaningless in the sense that a person, asked to identify his caste, would invariably refer to anything from occupation to some titular designation. The reality now has turned into a reality of multiple castes and castes reproving each other's claims.

Various ambitious castes quickly perceived the chances of their raising status. They invited conferences of their members, and formed councils to take steps to see that their statuses were recorded in the way they thought was honorable to them. Other castes that could not but resent this 'stealthy' procedure to advance, equally eagerly began to convert their claims. Thus a campaign of mutual

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recrimination was set on foot The total result has been a livening up of the caste spirit. (Ghurye, 1969: 278–79)

Accordingly, one caste was the 'other' to another caste, and so on. India can now be successfully analysed through innumerable castes and its varieties and each one is based on some imagined and/or authentically imagined differences. The reversed image of enlightenment and modernity is now in full existence in the form of 'ignoble savage'. Interestingly, the reaction to the official colonial view of caste evoked serious responses and reactions from the historians of India but, barring a few exceptions (for details, see, Mukherjee, 1958; Ghurye, 1969) sociologists' reaction in the first few decades of post-colonial India was almost imperceptible. Srinivas and a few others in 1960 opined that Weber's source materials were census and reports which provided data that were 'superficial, and occasionally not quite accurate'. As far as Weber himself was concerned, his 'theoretical interests and kind of data he used, led him to view caste in all India terms, and he did not realize sufficiently that caste was a highly localized phenomenon. But, in the end there is no denying the fact that Weber gave us 'many penetrating insights into caste and Hinduism' (Srinivas et al., 1959: 138). Incidentally Srinivas, though highly critical of the 'book-view' of caste, unfortunately did not take up the challenge of combating the jaundiced colonial official field-view of caste. At the other extreme, Marxist sociologists like A.R. Desai and others never really took up any critical examination of the aforementioned 'official' colonial view of caste or any other methodological and for theoretical problem associated with the concept of caste. In fact, it was only Dipankar Gupta who took upon himself the onerous duty of at least confronting Louis Dumontian variety of caste analysis systematically, other than of course, Andre Beteille who sharply criticized Dumont. Beteille's works on inequality including caste is voluminous and it is certainly outside the purview of this article. But as Yogendra Singh as early as 1969 wrote that 'Beteille takes a line on caste and class which is intermediate to the positions held by Weber and Marx' (Singh, 1969: 169). Beteille did not really offer much attention to the historical trajectory of caste to expose the futility of caste analysis which he could have

possibly achieved as his focus was on inequality. In his latest article on 'The Peculiar Tenacity of Caste' in 2012 he wrote that the disproportionate attention paid to caste has deprived attention to other major sources of inequality (2012: 46) but even though caste is losing strength in contemporary India, media attention to caste especially in daily political life has increased and lost sight of long-term changes in the changing nature of caste (ibid.).

The Pell-Mell of Caste, Varna, Jati and Louis Dumont

In fact, it is more realistic to say that there are probably as many hierarchies as there are castes in India. (Gupta, 2000: 1)

Let me now focus on the meanings and usages of caste, varna, and jati. Caste and sub-caste have been generally used as the English synonym for both varna and jati. The basic idea of varna is function and not birth. Each varna is supposed to perform a specific function. For some, varna signifies the first trace of division of labour. Jati, on the other hand, is generally defined by birth. But it is possible to choose whether one's jati refers to a more or less inclusive group as this is going to depend on context. In one context, one's jati is one's lineage; in another, it may be all the lineages with whom one can intermarry; in yet another, it may refer to those whose common ethnic or cultural heritage sets them apart from their neighbors. Jati, of the essence, is always a relative term (Quigley, 1993: 5). Marriott and Inden make it abundantly clear about the range and flexibility of the concept of jati.

One of the commonest words for genus in most Indian languages, jati, is derived from Indo-European verbal root meaning 'genesis', 'origin', or 'birth'. It is applied to any species of living things including gods and humans. Among humans, jati can designate a distinct sex, a race, a caste, or a tribe; a population, the followers of an occupation or a religion, or a nation. (Marriott and Inden, 1985: 349)

This remarkable and rare elasticity makes it absolutely meaningless to undertake any worthwhile endeavor to examine how many jatis there are in any specific society or region at any given point of time. Regrettably, how to locate and identify a jati has become generally one of the most frequently asked questions by those who attempt to quantify and classify jatis in a particular

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way. In an article, Beteille corroborates this when he informs that the concept of jati, there being no fixed number of jatis, 'can be stretched to accommodate all kinds of units, that cannot be accommodated by varna' (1996: 22).

This implies that jati can mean from manabjati (humanity) to kayasthajati (a particular mixed community where originally kayastha meaning 'scribe' in Sanskrit (Bhardwaj, 1993: 231), or from narijati (womenfolk) to biharijati (people from Bihar) etc., and this often can lead to substantial bewilderment even among them who are aware that jati is a relative term (Quigley, 1993: 5). In criticizing attempts to equate varna with caste, Srinivas wrote the following quite forcefully about half a century back:

The varna model has produced a wrong and distorted view of caste. It is necessary for the sociologists to free himself from the hold of the varna model if he wishes to understand the caste system. (1991: 31)

According to Beteille, Srinivas's impatience with the Varna model was a response to the dominance in Indian writing about society of what he called the 'book-view' which he was eager to replace with the 'field-view' (1996: 17). In fact, the empirical evidence suggests that four varna model was difficult to trace as Nayars, a warrior group, or Chetiars, a merchant group, have been considered sudras. Another example was 'the Shannas of Southern Tamil Nadu, whose traditional occupation was tapping the palmyra tree for its juices to make palm-sugar and a tody drink, claimed that they were really kshatriyas, and should be called Nadars meaning Lords of the Land' (Hardgrave, 1969: 31). During census operation of 19th century they claimed high varna status and were successful. The point is that four varna model may be either purely a textual view or it represented the early development of division of labour, and not anything more than that. For example, Pauline Kolenda distinguished between varna and jati by asserting that varna signified 'occupational specialization' and jati stands for 'in-migrating groups, tribal groups with a newly developed craft' (1984: 35). These examples can be multiplied (Quigley, 1993; Dirks, 2001). The point is that 'to set out with the idea that castes are, in general, bounded groups with a fixed membership is to embark on a path of endless frustration' (Quigley, 1993: 9). That is to say, this intensely

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problematic dimensions of caste preclude any stable conceptualization of caste. Moreover, its non-correspondence either with varna and/or jati makes caste even more an unproductive category. Though caste and sub-caste have been used in the most happy-go-lucky manner in Anthropological Orientalized fashion for varna and jati, they do not correspond either to varna or to jati. Varna model is not an all India model and jati is infinitely an elastic term which could mean many different things depending on the context. On the top of it 'there is endless dispute about which jati belongs to which varna and which does not' (ibid.: 7). Let me cite Jonathan Parry's work on *Caste and Kinship in Kangra* (1979) which makes it abundantly clear that varna refers to a function and not to the name of a group characterized by kinship. Additionally, it becomes positively evident that 'there is no consensus regarding the placement of some castes in the varna hierarchy' (Quigley, 1993: 92). So, there is no clear-cut-correspondence between caste and kinship which some analysts are so determined to establish (Kolenda: 1984). Therefore, if one takes the case of jatis, they are not closed groups. On the contrary, they are extremely flexible. On the other hand, if one takes varna it is neither a fixed model in terms of function and occupational position if one reads indigenous materials of pre-colonial India (Bhadra, 1989), nor a stationary one and which, also has not been actually an operational principle in reality. Consequently, then the logical question is 'does caste belong only in a relativist discourse about India in terms of cultural particularity ... and/or dehistoricizes it as a timeless and archaic organic society... which sets it apart from the rest of the contemporary world?' (Sharma, 2002: 30)

Any and all discourses on caste cannot take place in any form or shape without referring to Louis Dumont's views on caste because as Ursula Sharma so astutely reminds us that 'even thirty years after its publication, general discussion of caste among anthropologists still tend to take Dumont's work as a major point of departure' (Sharma, 2002: 23). In fact, 'a careful reading of Louis Dumont's several works on the caste system confirms that for Dumont the ideology of the caste system is all pervasive without exception in Hindu India. For the Hindus, Dumont avers, 'belief in God is secondary to belief in caste' (Gupta, 2000: 69), Dumont's whole 'comparative sociology' is

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dependent on the binary difference between 'traditional' and 'modern' societies as shown earlier. For Dumont, the sole objective of comparison is to account for the modern type in terms of the traditional type where India was the classic instance of the latter. And India, as one of world's great civilization appears in stark contrast, regarding its values, to the modern type of society. This is the 'caste society which is characterized essentially by its adherence to hierarchy as the paramount value, exactly opposite to the equalitarianism that is one of the main values in our own, modern type of society' (Dumont, 1977: 3). Does this by any figment of imagination recall that Dumont's cherished notion of 'comparative sociology' is nothing but only a principle of difference to understand the 'other' culture of India based on the absence of the idea of individual, specifically the so-called Western individual who was by the way the repository of equality and liberty? Does this not take us about a couple of century earlier when both Hegel and Marx were frantically searching for the individuation and individuality but could not find the individual or the spirit of individualism in India? This absence of the individual particularly for Marx was one of the most fundamental causes for eternal stagnation of Asian societies. Marx categorically asserted that the 'Asiatic form necessarily hangs on most tenaciously and for the longest time. This is due to its presupposition that the individual does not become independent vis-à-vis commune' (Grundrisse, 1973: 486). Of course, Dumont was not able to tell whether in Europe there ever was any non-individual, say serfs or slaves at any point of time. It is rather unlikely for Dumont to concede to the fact that Europe's egalitarian societies had extremely repressive regimes or social orders. Scholars like Dumont hardly looked back because then the theory he so feverishly propagated could be a real embarrassment for him. Therefore, at bottom, all this talk about 'comparative sociology' is nothing but rather an avowal and then celebration of the imagined 'other', apparently highlighting the differences between India and Europe. There is little doubt that for Dumont, the category of caste, whatever that may or may not be, serves as both a handy ideal and a concept for dividing humanity.

The distinctiveness of Dumont's caste was in the principle of hierarchy based on the opposition of the pure and the impure. Superiority and superior

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purity are identical: it is in this sense that, ideologically, distinction of purity is the foundation of status. Thus for the fundamental characteristic of the caste system for comparison is the hierarchical disjunction between status and power (1980: 56 & 232). Dumont wrote to illustrate his point further that in theory of the varnas one finds that status and power are differentiated, just as the general consideration of hierarchy seemed to require (ibid.: 72). According to Dumont, the opposition between pure and impure is sustained by the disjunction between ritual status and secular power which characterizes Hindu society. He argues that within the caste system, there are two competing sources of authority – the spiritual authority of Brahmanas and the temporal authority of the kings. In the ideology of caste, he argues, temporal authority is subordinated to, encompassed by spiritual authority. For all practical purposes, Dumont's theory of caste is thus historically and conceptually based on Brahmanas and their alleged superior status. But Dumont alone cannot be accused for being obsessed with Brahmanical model. In point of fact, 'so deep rooted is the Brahmanical version of the caste system in academic circles that it really requires an empirical jolt to shake it loose' (Gupta, 2000: 3). If this is the scenario then how can Dumont, a very mainstream observer of caste detour? By making the Brahmanical worldview as the only noteworthy aspect of Indian society he deliberately neglected the existence of any other alternative worldview or even contested worldview. Accordingly, by successfully achieving in making the Brahmanic as the only worldview, Dumont was constructing 'a master narrative of Indian society' that artificially produced Brahmanic worldviews as the sole representative of the whole of Indian society (Das, 2009: 198) even though in India especially when both Hinduism and Brahmanism have always been characterized by ideological pluralism along with many movements hostile to Brahmanism and priests. This unquestionably is a clear corroboration of Orientalist paradigmatic presence in Dumontian worldview where so-called oriental/traditional societies are represented as homogeneous and devoid of diversities and/or associated complexities unlike Europe/West which produces history and thus makes those European societies dynamic, progressive, rational, etc. Here, it will be pertinent to bring Srinivas back into

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the interrogation on the undue importance of the Brahmanical position as the unitary portrayal of Indian caste. Srinivas wrote in his *Social Change in Modern India*:

I now realize that in both my book on Coorg religion and my "Note on Sanskritization and Westernization", I emphasized unduly the Brahmanical model of Sanskritization and ignored the other models Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. (1966 [2009]: 7)

Srinivas also tells us about the diversity of Brahman varna. 'In the first place, some elements of the local culture would be common to all the castes living in a region, from the highest to the lowest. Thus the Brahmin and Harijan (Untouchable) of a region would speak the same language, observe common festivals and share certain local deities and beliefs. I have called this 'vertical solidarity and it contrasts with "Horizontal solidarity" which members of a single caste or Varna have' (ibid.: 8).

Continuing in the same thread, it can be said that in the luminary company of Marx and Weber, Dumont inherited the appreciation of so-called comparative method from two traditions, one of Orientalists and the other of Colonial Anthropologists. Dumont's argument of absence of individualism in traditional society like India similar to his intellectual predecessors/mentors of these two varieties is teleological as he takes this as axiomatic and as a binary opposite with modern society. 'There is no shortage of historical examples of oppressed peoples' liberation movement in traditional societies which Dumont could not find because he sealed their faith without checking' (Quigley, 1993: 42). Besides, Dumont's contention that one can meaningfully characterize Hindu society or even the caste system in terms of a consensus of values is extremely problematic. In this connection, Beteille wrote, 'Dumont concedes 'that the identification of paramount values is of course open to debate and is not supposed to be always easy'. I am not sure that he realizes how much he is giving away by making that concession – or perhaps he feels that he has covered himself adequately with phrases like 'supposed to be' and 'always' (2009: 112). Beteille further affirmed: 'I do not believe that there is any society in which all values are of equal significance, and I doubt if any

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sociologist believes in such nonsense. But that does not oblige me to agree that all values can be arranged in a single hierarchy of the kind specified by Dumont' (ibid.).

What is more intriguing and a clear indication of Dumont's cluttered thinking is this: To begin with, Dumont has argued that in the ideology of caste, temporal authority is subordinated to, and encompassed by, spiritual authority. But surprisingly and interestingly, Dumont himself agrees that the observable facts do indeed contradict his theory. 'In theory, power is ultimately subordinate to priesthood, whereas in fact priesthood submits to power' (1966 [1980]: 71–72). There is, he says, a 'confrontation of ideology with observation' (ibid.: 77). But he is crystal clear about his preference: 'first, we shall be concerned with the ideology, which easily accounts for the overall framework' (ibid.: 76). But what happens when Dumont faces contradictory evidence 'Dumont simply says that the facts are not important'. (Quigley, 1993: 82)

This is certainly in the celebrated tradition of classical Orientalists like Hegel, Marx and, of course, Weber (See, Bhadra, 1989). Dipankar Gupta has levelled a host of criticisms against Dumont's views on caste and hierarchy. He provides some relevant facts to contradict Dumont. For example, 'why is a vegetarian merchant below the meat eating king? Or why do "untouchables" of Tanjore village believe that if a Brahman were to enter their village, pestilence and disease would strike it? Why do farmers "pose" as puritans? In short, the major problem is: why do people who believe in the caste system not follow the dictates of the true hierarchy? Is there a true hierarchy at all in the sense in which Dumont has enunciated it with reference to the caste system? Is it possible that contrary to Dumont's belief of total allegiance to the pure hierarchy, castes indeed have very different notions of who they are and what positions they should occupy in that hierarchy' (Gupta, 2000: 64–65). Could there be several hierarchies as it is not possible to hold innumerable number of castes in one hierarchy? Or, are there as many hierarchies as there are castes? In fact, all societies have rules and taboos and in a sense and concerned with purity is to a great extent 'human universal' but this can hardly be used 'to explain a particular case such as caste India'. The researches of Hesterman,

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Parry and Fuller have shown that we need to 'construct a composite league table ranking various types of Brahmanas in relation to one another' (Quigley, 1993: 46 & 66). History proves to us that it was not possible for all Brahmans to earn their livelihood by becoming priests (See, Yadav, 1973). Hocart's book *Caste: A Comparative Study* (1950 [1938]) has shown that caste like phenomena were prevalent in almost all ancient societies and not alone confined to Hindu India. Hocart's book was first published in French in 1938. Did Dumont read Hocart's book? Or, even if he read it did he decide to suppress that? Neither Dumont's unfounded metaphysical theory nor the advocates of Dumont could answer this. Again, Dumont had a real aptitude for turning speculative into empirical and empirical into speculative in the distinguished Orientalist tradition of Hegel, Marx and Weber when it comes to societies like India.

It is perplexing that though neither varna nor jati has direct correspondence with caste or sub-caste, this unhappy translation continues and still enjoys hegemonic position even though a lot of water has flown down all the sociological explanations of Indian society. At bottom, the net result is that we keep creating as many Indians as there are castes, as per the colonial classification and careful arrangement of our destiny. To give the benefit of doubt, British administrators might have understood the system in religious terms and once it was codified and enshrined in census reports they saw that it is serving their purpose of dividing Indians and they evidently stuck to it. But what is 'puzzling that modern scholars should so often concur with the colonial interpretation of caste when their own evidence contradicts it repeatedly. Why should they claim that the Brahman stands supreme when, time after time, his status is shown to be at best intensely ambivalent, at worst vilely degrading?' (Quigley, 1993: 84). How long is it apposite to lay the blame on the Colonial masters and the European conspiracy and not embark on proper analysis of whatever India had and has?

This brings us face to face with the stark reality of the problem of finding suitable conceptual categories with which we can explain Indian social reality. Let me once again go back to what Srinivas, Beteille and others wrote in 1960 while explaining the phenomenon of caste dominance.

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The concept of dominance shows that it was not always or even usually, the Brahmin who dominated the caste hierarchy. ... In actual fact, however, a caste which owned land were genuinely dominant only when they owned land. Where land was owned by other and lower castes, the Brahmin retained his high ritual position, but had little influence in secular matters, and even in ritual matters, he was likely to be brushed aside by a leader of the dominant caste. It was the land owing castes which were the most Influential. (Srinivas et al., 1959: 140. Emphases added)

Kolenda wrote to the same effect that the 'largest jati, making up over 40 per cent of Khalpur's population, was the landowning Rajputs' (1984: 87).

Closing Thoughts

If ever there was a pandora's box, caste is it (Quigley, 1993: 158).

With the concept of caste thus doing intellectual and administrative overtime, we might ask whether it was ever anything but a projection of the western ideological imagination. Has it had, or could it have any analytic force as a sociological tool? (Sharma: 10)

Caste was ensconced as the only identity for Indians and the quintessential 'other' to Europeans and the most anthropologically oriented sociologists of the first three decades or so after India's independence, accepted it with benign protest and mild concussion. It was only in the late 1980s or so that a new discourse on the anomalies of the notion of caste and its empirical applications and the challenges posed to the Orientalist and Colonial Anthropological narratives gradually gained strength to dispute a few old assumptions and also empirical facts on the so-called 'master status' label of Indians. If we still retain the category of caste to explain Indian social reality some of the unresolved predicaments and unanswered questions/objections are as follows:

- How is class related to varna and jati in theory and praxis?
- How is varna related to jati in theory and praxis? And is it possible for them to be related?
- What is really the meaning of hierarchy as casteness and caste as a matter of consciousness? How one can distinguish between ethnicity and

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casteness, between tribalness and casteness and between classness and casteness?

- Should one can go further and try to differentiate between casteness and varnanness, casteness and jatiness, and varnanness and jatiness?
- Do we really need the term 'caste' in view of the stark reality that we cannot even give a working definition of 'caste' because the theoretical criteria and the actual contexts vary unlimitedly from village to village, city to city, region to region and even within a single village, neighbourhood or community?
- The discourse of caste-as-identity ran into a lot of contradictions and inconsistencies as the identity constructed by the caste may not square with the identity attributed to it by others, like 'Brahmans should be affluent, educated and cultured but some of them are poor and illiterate and have to plough the land'. Therefore, is caste as identity a productive endeavor for further research?
- Is there any validity in using caste as a general concept in Social Science minus the Indian context?
- Are we scared to get rid of caste as a conceptual category because we are told that it exists in some form or other even though we do not have a proper definition and at best can express it through some rituals and customary prohibitions as if these do not exist in so-called 'non-caste' societies?
- Therefore, if the institution of caste does not possess any enduring content to the essence of India as the Orientalist scholars and observers of 19th century were inclined to think, then, can we more or less safely conclude that 'the concept of caste is of no value at all if it simply confirms us in our view that societies like India are strange, "essentially" different, governed by quite alien principles' (ibid.: 94)?.
- The central point, ergo, is then, why can not social scientists find fitting reflexive classification based on sound theoretical logic and empirical reality to study Indian reality without resorting to Eurocentric, Colonial biases and categories? Can we attempt to reconceptualize in an intersectional way?

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There is no denying the fact that caste is haunting as a spectre on the body politic of India as we have brought back the Colonial legacy in the census of 2011. This is clearly an attestation of the inability of modern India to break the covert manacles and sinister nexus of the colonial past and keep reproducing the Archetypal 'Orientalist' predicament of sociological imagination on India.

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