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Brahmans, Kings, Pariahs: Castes, Exchange and Untouchability in Western India Today

Introduction

For over two centuries, Western observers of India have been so fascinated by the caste system that they have seen in it the very essence of Indian society. Their understanding and explanations of its bewildering complexity have reflected the assumptions and sensitivities peculiar to their own European cultures and times. If I single out the French anthropologist Louis Dumont's writings on the subject, it is because his model of the caste system has been extremely influential in moulding western perceptions of India in the last three decades. I would suggest that it is possible to locate Dumont's work in the context of Orientalism as a mode of discourse (Randeria 1980).

Following Said (1978), this may be seen as a style of thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident stemming from the rather special place of the Orient in European historical experience. For over two centuries the Orient provided the West with one of its deepest and most recurring images of the 'Other' and European identity was constituted by setting itself off against a civilization seen as absolutely dissimilar to it in every respect. India, even more than the Islamic world, has thus helped define the West as its contrasting image, personality and experience.

Dumont's construction of Indian society, which shares several features of the Orientalist discourse, reduces it to the caste system as a religious system based on a single principle, that of hierarchy. Contrary to his and Weber's Brahman-centered models of the caste system, I would argue that the caste system can equally well be conceived of as a political system. Asymmetrical exchanges based on hierarchy are constitutive of the collective pollution and stigmatization of the untouchable castes at the bottom of the hierarchy, as Dumont contends. But in other contexts, it is the idea of equality, adhered to with meticulous care, which characterizes ex-

changes of food, women, goods, and money within each untouchable caste. Caste relations are not simply expressions of hierarchy, dominance, and equality as values. Rather they are constituted in social practice through the actions of people choosing to emphasize one or the other of these values according to context.

The world of caste is a relational one as Dumont rightly recognizes, but as Ramanujan (1990) has shown, it is also relativistic in that it is highly sensitive to context. The broader comparative framework of exchange focuses our understanding of caste on a feature it shares with all human societies without losing sight of the Indian specificities. The Dumontian framework of hierarchy, in my opinion, limits the comparative vision to only that aspect of Indian society which presents the greatest contrast to the West.

However important it may be to study a society in its own terms, comparisons are indispensable in anthropology. Conventional anthropological wisdom has it that one's culture is rather like one's own nose, it is difficult to see (Barley, 1990). Complete ignorance of a culture is thus a prerequisite for anthropological expertise. I chose not to make a virtue out of this European necessity and to study my own society, but a part of it with which I had not been in touch before — the "untouchable" castes. In the absence of an Indian language composite term to designate these castes, I use the term "untouchable" castes as no entirely satisfactory alternative exists. (The inverted commas are dropped hereafter for reasons of style.) Data generated during sixteen months of fieldwork among these castes in Gujarat, western India, form the empirical base of the present analysis.

This paper analyses the status of untouchable castes in terms of the nature of their collective impurity and the structure of gift-exchange among them. That sociality among these groups is constituted through relations of exchange is evident in a remark that members of these castes often made to one another in a variety of contexts: "We are in the world in order to exchange." The Gujarati word *vahevar*, which I have translated as exchange (of gifts), also means relationship, behaviour, social interaction, or even a loan of money. Gifts of women, food, and money are reflective and constitutive of social relationships, in a world in which movement and transformation through public exchange and consumption are the nature, if not the very meaning, of life. These gift-exchanges are obligatory, are not independent of the person of the giver, and do not express any personal sentiment, in contrast to gifts in western societies. Life-course rituals (especially death rituals and commemorative mortuary feasts) are socially approved contexts for both elaborate gift-exchange and lavish public consumption. Reciprocal exchange and shared public consumption constitute castes as endogamous and commensal units, even as they mark the

boundaries between and within them. Or as the Untouchables put it: "We exchange women where we exchange food."

The Untouchables form a community at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy. Regarded as ritually polluted, they are socially discriminated against, politically disadvantaged, and among the poorest in rural India. They comprise 15% of the population of the country, i.e. 128 million people belong to about 300 different untouchable castes scattered all over the country. In Gujarat in an area twice the size of the former GDR, with a population of 34 million, 8% of the population is untouchable. These are castes of weavers, tanners, bow-and-arrow-makers, basket-makers, scavengers, as well as a caste of priests and one of genealogists who serve these castes exclusively.

The paper begins with a brief critique of the Orientalist view of India as represented in the writings of Dumont. The next section contrasts my model of the untouchable sub-system with Dumont's hierarchical model of it. In the third part I show how ideas of dominance, hierarchy and equality are used in practice to create and structure relations between and within castes. The question of whether Untouchables believe in untouchability is dealt with in the subsequent section. I conclude with some comparative remarks on exchange, consumption and gifts of money.

Dumont and the orientalist construction of India

Said has argued that "the Orient was almost a European invention" (1978: 1), but the myth also partly came to constitute its object, as the relation between these two unequal halves of the world was one of domination and varying degrees of complex hegemony. Orientalist discourse on India has a long and illustrious Anglo-German genealogy which cannot be explored here. Many writers on both sides shared a nostalgia for a society based on religious values, but there were also major differences between and among them. Whereas the English discourse (e.g. Maine, James Mill) was part of the British conquest of India and its legitimisation, Orientalists like Herder or Max Müller were more concerned with constructing a German national identity through a search for its linguistic roots. The German philological research was, in fact, used by Indian nationalists in constructing a positive self-identity to counter the negative British image of Indian society and its institutions.

As Inden (1990) has shown, the problem with Orientalism of any variety is not just its bias but its displacement of the agency of the Indians on to es-

sences like the Hindu mind, divine kingship, Hinduism or caste. Dumont's construction of India shares with Hegel, Marx and Weber some features of this essentializing discourse. (1) It denies history and politics to Indian society while attributing to it a timeless essence. (2) This essence consists in the unique religious institution of the caste system with Brahmans at its center. (3) A dichotomous view of the world in which India as the 'Other' is seen as the mirror-image of the European self.

Dumont's comparative framework begins by juxtaposing India and the modern West as societies diametrically opposed to one another, the former characterized by an all-encompassing religious ideology, the latter based on the primacy of an autonomous economic domain, the one traditional, holistic and hierarchical, the other modern, individualistic and egalitarian. Two "apparently incommensurable social types" (Dumont 1972: 282) so radically different from one another as to mould two different varieties of men — 'homo hierarchicus' and 'homo aequalis'. *Homo Hierarchicus* was the title of Dumont's masterpiece on India published in 1966. 'Homo Aequalis' was the promised title of his book on the West, which, however, in English translation was called *From Mandeville to Marx: Genesis and triumph of economic ideology*. Dumont is not wrong to insist on some striking differences between values and institutions in India and the West. But to reduce comparison to mirror-images as he does or to stages in an evolutionary scheme as earlier Orientalists did, distorts their view of India.

Dumont argues that Indian society is unique in the extent to which the religious ideology of hierarchy permeates all spheres of life within it. This is made possible by the disjunction and subordination of political and economic power to religious status. Focusing on the hierarchy of castes, their separation with regard to inter-marriage and inter-dining and the division of labour between them, he shows that these three features of the caste system are derived from a single opposition between purity and impurity. Hierarchy is based on the idea that the pure is superior to the impure. The necessity of the high castes to minimise contact with impure lower castes leads to separation. The division of labour ensures that upper castes maintain their purity, while the pollution they incur in their daily lives is drained away by the services provided by the lower castes.

The diagram below (figure 1) represents Dumont's model of the system as a hierarchy of castes in descending order of purity. The Brahmans are at the apex followed by the warrior-kings or the dominant landholding castes who have functionally replaced them today. In the middle are castes like goldsmiths or carpenters followed by more impure ones like the washermen or barbers. At the bottom of the system are the Untouchables. If the Brahman priest transmits purity down the hierarchy, the lower castes, especially the Untouchables, transmit purity upwards. They do so by

absorbing into their persons the pollution incurred through contact with impure substances like blood, excrement, hair, dead cattle and corpses. So that for Dumont, the purity of the Brahman priest is transactionally and also conceptually linked to the pollution of the Untouchables. The caste system would be unthinkable without either of them.

Paradigmatic for the separation of religion and power at the apex of the system is the disjunction between the spiritual superiority of the priest and the temporal power of the king. The hierarchy of pure and impure implies that the priest is superior to the king. Dumont insists that this devaluation of power is not only a feature of Hindu ideology as embodied in classical texts but is present in every Indian village. The dominant caste which exer-



Figure 1: Dumont's model: the caste hierarchy

cises political and economic power in a village on the basis of its numerical strength and ownership of land is ranked lower than the priests who are materially dependent on it.

What Dumont shares with the Orientalists, including Weber, is the reduction of Indian society to Hinduism, Hinduism to the caste system and a construction of caste centered around the Brahman. Such an essentialist construction reduces society to religion, while erasing the significance of the political domain. As Dirks shows in his book aptly titled *The Hollow Crown* (1987), this restructuring of castes was only possible once the kingdoms holding them together had been weakened due to British rule. So that what Dumont takes to be the traditional system is in reality the colonial or post-colonial situation.

More than a third of Indian territory and a fifth of the population remained until Independence in 1947 under the authority of local kings, with only indirect British rule. In Gujarat alone there were 600 such kingdoms at the turn of the century. "In pre-colonial Hindu India the king — both as a historical figure and as a trope for the complex political dynamics underlying the Indian social order — was a central ordering factor in the social organization of caste" (Dirks 1990: 59). Even as colonial rule undermined his political authority, it contributed to the ascendancy of the Brahman as mediators for the British. Castes severed from a political center, weak kings and strong Brahmans, around whom Indian society then came to revolve, were all colonial creations. In the Orientalist discourse these were then projected backwards as the 'traditional' India from time immemorial. Through a sleight of the Orientalist hand and mind, the king disappeared and the British and Brahmans appeared as the integrators of Indian society.

Such a view of India has also become part of the Indians' own representation of their society. In fact, the very categories in which Untouchables are talked about in India today are products of a colonial discourse. The word 'untouchable' is a British invention which does not correspond to any Indian language term. It was used in print in English for the first time in 1909 and translated thereafter into many Indian languages. Gandhi coined the euphemism *Harijan* meaning 'children of God' in the hope of giving them a positive identity within the Hindu fold. This was in the 1920s, at a time when the British were trying to woo away the Untouchables from the nationalist cause by offering them special administrative concessions and political privileges. Incidentally, these are the historical roots of caste-based quotas for the Untouchables. Ironically these quotas are today the main instrument of state policy for distributive justice, a major bone of contention for the upper castes and the cornerstone of untouchable self-identity.

The Untouchable system

Even if the term 'Untouchable' is unfortunate in that it views these castes from the upper-caste perspective, for whom they are 'untouchable', it is, nevertheless, preferable to the English term 'outcaste' or its German equivalent 'kastenlos'. For no Hindu is without a caste or outside it. One can be temporarily thrown out of one's own caste for transgressing its rules. After appropriate negotiations with the caste council and the payment of a fine one is repurified and reintegrated into one's own caste. During this interlude the offender is considered temporarily polluted so that no member of his caste will exchange food, gifts or a woman in marriage with him or his family.

Every Hindu is and can be temporarily impure due to menstruation, birth or a death in the family and will be treated similarly as 'untouchable' until he or she has regained ritual purity through a bath. Members of untouchable castes are, however, collectively and permanently polluted due to their association with death, which is the most potent of all the sources of impurity and inauspiciousness in the life of a Hindu. The weavers and tanners are also cattle scavengers who drag away dead animals from the village into their own settlement. They thus remove the impurity of the carcass from the village and transfer it on to themselves. The caste of cremation-ground attendants is responsible for gathering wood for the funeral pyre and looking after the burning corpse. The castes of priests, genealogists and barbers serving these castes are considered impure through the acceptance of gifts from such polluted patrons. Thus according to the higher castes all Untouchables are collectively and permanently polluted on account of their association with animal or human death.

Following Dumont, one could diagrammatically represent the untouchable sub-system as a hierarchy (fig. 2). It replicates in truncated form the services of those castes in the larger system who refuse to serve Untouchables. At the top are untouchable priests, who replicate the ritual services of the Brahman. Next in rank are weavers and tanners, who are the functional analogues of the dominant landlord castes. They are followed by the musicians-cum-genealogists. Next come the basket makers who are also barbers to the weavers and tanners. At the very bottom are the cremation-ground attendants, who are considered to be beyond the pale on account of their occupational contact with corpses (Randeria 1989).

But it is also possible to construct a different model of the system, if one recognises the existence of several contextually shifting ideologies, besides hierarchy, in the daily lives of the villagers (Raheja 1988a, b, 1990). In her study of the linguistic and ritual contexts of prestations, Raheja analyses

three aspects of inter-caste relations — centrality, mutuality and hierarchy. Why I prefer `equality' or `sharing` to `mutuality' as a term (which emphasizes the reciprocity of services rendered between castes or payments for such services) will become clear in the next section on carrion distribution. I use the term `dominance' rather than `centrality' because the core idea of the latter, namely gift-giving by the dominant caste in order to maintain the auspiciousness of the village through a transfer of sin and evil from the donor of the gift to its recipients (Raheja 1988a), is absent in Gujarat. Untouchables rule out the possibility that sin and inauspiciousness may be transferred from the person who has incurred them through his deeds. They stress that gifts are given in fulfilment of one's obligations as well as to earn merit.

That the Untouchables themselves sometimes construct their sub-



Figure 2: The untouchable sub-system: a hierarchical model

system as revolving around their own dominant castes of gift-givers, rather than as a hierarchy around their Brahman priests, became clear to me from the following incident in 1983 during my first fieldwork. As I sat at the home of a tanner one night, three young men of the caste came in to tell us of how they had beaten up an untouchable priest who had filed a court case against them on entirely trumped up charges. Everyone agreed that it was the only way to deal with the quarrelsome fellow who used his well-paid government job to harass his untouchable neighbours. The next morning a policeman arrived to interrogate several of the tanners on the events of the previous day. All of them said in their recorded statements that the man in question was a Brahman and did not belong to their caste. Therefore they neither had any *vahevar* (social interaction, exchange relationship) nor any quarrel with him. Not a word was said about the deference due to him as someone belonging to a ritually superior caste. On the contrary, the tanners emphasized that it was their duty to give gifts, not blows, to untouchable priests who were materially dependent on them. The policeman did not appear convinced, so they suggested that he consult their anthropologist who would confirm all these facts. Fortunately for me, the policeman did not think much of anyone who lived with Untouchables and had even less regard for anthropological knowledge, so the matter ended there.

But the statements of the tanners gave me an important clue to an alternative model of the caste system (figure 3). (Unlike Raheja's model and diagram [1990: 94], mine has two centres, as I consider the untouchable sub-system as a largely autonomous microcosm with strong ritual and economic links to the village and its dominant caste.) In many a ritual context, the tanners saw it as a hierarchy in which the priests ranked higher than themselves. But in several other spheres they saw themselves as the pivot of the system, obliged to give gifts to priests, genealogists, barbers and cremation-ground attendants who were materially dependent on them. It is on the untouchable periphery of the system that one sees especially clearly the abject dependence of the Brahman, a paragon of purity devoid of all political and economic power.

Of course, the importance of mere purity should not be dismissed lightly because it can also be put to good use to coerce one's patrons into giving gifts. This is the traditional practice of *traguri*, by which a Brahman publicly threatens to harm or kill himself, if he is not given what he demands. Such demands are acceded to, for otherwise the non-gift giver would incur the mortal sin of having caused injury to a Brahman. Mahatma Gandhi's public fasts in order to press for political demands in the course of the nationalist movement may be seen as an ingenious political use of this traditional practice. He undertook one such fast unto death to oppose separate

electoral constituencies for the Untouchables proposed by the British. Untouchable leaders did not dare accept the British offer thereafter, as they were afraid of violence against Untouchables if Gandhi were to die. Such fasts have since become an integral part of the political culture of the country. Whether this 'non-violent' method, based on the threat of violence to oneself, can be seen as a 'weapon of the weak' (to misappropriate the title of Scott's book on everyday forms of peasant resistance), depends on one's definition of power.

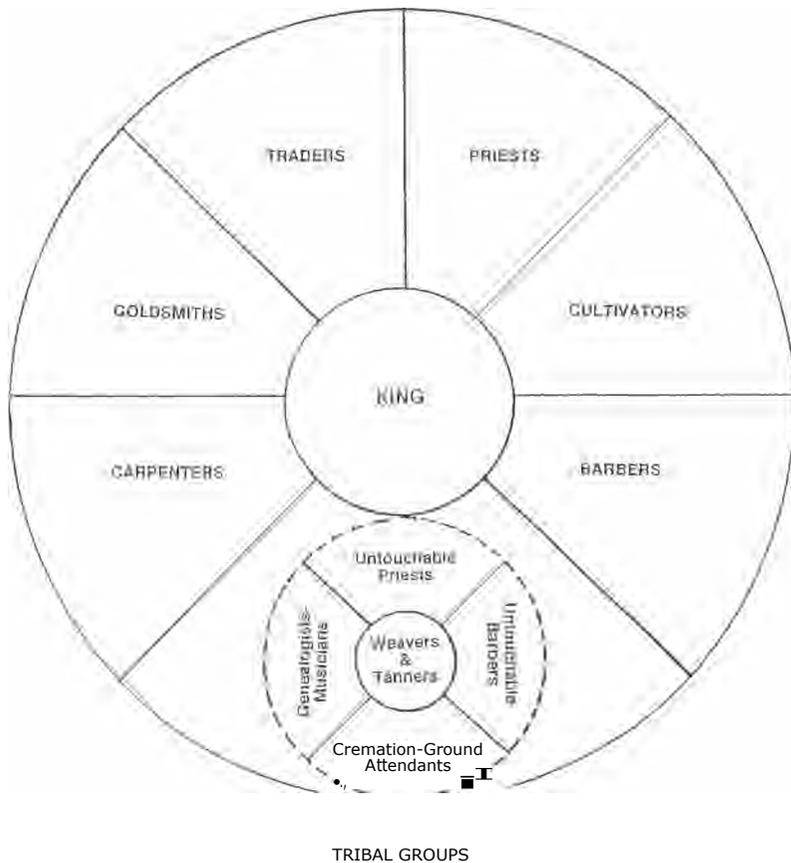


Figure 3: An alternative model of the untouchable sub-system

Carrion distribution

The distribution of carrion being restricted among the untouchable castes, it is an interesting context in which to examine the interplay of dominance, hierarchy and equality. In the past all untouchable castes ate carrion, i.e., the meat of an animal (buffalo, ox, cow) which had died a natural death and not been slaughtered. All of them today claim to have given up this practice as it lowered their status in the eyes of the upper castes.

Earlier every *dead* animal in the village was the joint property of the weavers and tanners. They dragged it into their settlement, flayed it and distributed the carrion to all the untouchable castes. The body of the dead animal can be seen as a metaphor for the untouchable sub-system. The untouchable priests got the head of each animal, the scavengers received the feet, hooves, intestines, and kidneys. With meticulous care the rest was equally distributed between the weavers and tanners. This pattern shows a striking similarity to the ancient Vedic myth of the origin of the four *varnas* from the primeval man — the priest from his head, the warriors from his arms, the cultivators from his thighs, and the servants from his feet. The inter-caste distribution of carrion reproduces the hierarchical division of society in terms of the hierarchical division of the human or animal body.

But if hierarchy had been the only consideration, the priests should have got the most meat, or at least the best parts. What the carrion distribution also reflects, as well as produces, is the dominance of the weavers and tanners, who after retaining the lion's share, distribute the rest as gifts to the others. Untouchable priests are bracketed together as carrion receivers with genealogists or cremation-ground attendants, but each caste receives according to its differential status. It is clear that dominance is not only based on ownership of land, for most weavers and tanners who are the gift-giving patrons were and still are landless. Their joint role as cattle scavengers gives them the material means of patronage due to their ownership of carrion and access to a cash income from the sale of hides.

The untouchable sub-system, though relatively autonomous, was not free of interference from the local ruler in the past. He could command, e.g., that the lowest caste of cremation-ground attendants be given certain additional choice cuts of carrion. When the weavers in the village tried to cheat them of this privilege, they filed a case (backed by the king) against the weavers in the court of the British Agent. So that there were very definite limits to the autonomy of the untouchable microcosm, as the material and symbolic means of domination within it lay outside the sub-system. In the past, an effective means of punishing the Untouchables and coercing

them into submission was to spray the dead cattle with insecticide or to cover it with cow-dung thus rendering it inedible.

If hierarchy and dominance structure some of the relations between castes, it is equality or sharing which structures the relations within a caste or between castes of equal rank. As mentioned earlier, a major portion of the carrion used to be divided equally between the weavers and tanners. What did this division look like? It was not only that each of the two castes, and within it each patrilineage, received the same quantity of meat; they also each received the same quality of meat. Each part of the animal was divided equally into two halves, one each for the weavers and tanners. It was then subdivided into as many portions as there were patrilineages within the caste. For example, the liver, which was the prerogative of the weavers, was cut into three parts and given to each of their three patrilineages. Within each lineage an equal share was ensured by the principle of rotation among households.

The level at which meticulous care is taken to ensure an equal distribution of shares in food is that of patrilineages and households in the caste-settlement in a village and not individual members. Each lineage or household unit is treated as equal regardless of its size or income. The distribution of carrion also illustrates the importance of relativity in the world of castes. The context sensitivity of gift-exchange becomes apparent here when we consider the fact that the untouchable priests who accept carrion, the most polluted of foods, usually neither eat nor drink at the houses of their patrons. They insist on receiving prestations in the purest of media, that of raw food grains or money, in return for the performance of rituals. In the context of carrion, however, the priest is equated with the other service castes. So that the priest who is higher in one context is equivalent to barbers, genealogists, and cremation-ground attendants in another context. Thus hierarchy is not the paramount value articulated in all contexts and at all levels of the system, nor does it evince a fixed or single ranking as Dumont contends; "the order lies ... in a pragmatically constituted set of shifting meanings and shifting configurations of castes" (Raheja 1988b : 517).

Myths of origin and self-representation

"Do untouchables believe in untouchability?" is a question that has long been controversial. My material from Gujarat suggests that there is some ambivalence among the untouchable castes in this regard. Each believes in the untouchability of the others but not its own. I use the myths of origin of

these castes in order to analyse their collective identities, as these make available a space for untouchable self-representation independent of the dominant discourse. These myths are recorded, preserved, and recited by their genealogists to individual patron families or at an assembly of the caste. With an audience consisting of only the members of the caste concerned, the mythical histories are hardly known outside it. Their primary function seems to be the substitution of a positive identity to replace the stigmatised one imposed from above. Their objective does not seem to be to make a bid for higher status in the eyes of the upper castes.

My argument on the self-identity of Untouchables is located between the following two positions. Dumont assumes that all members of the caste system, regardless of their position in it, share a homogeneous set of religious values, hierarchy, purity, and pollution. Berreman (1971), Gough (1973) and Mender (1974) have, on the contrary, argued that the caste system is based on economic and political domination. Far from there being an ideological consensus, those at the bottom of the system have an alternative subculture with distinctive values of their own. Mof-fat's (1979) position, midway between these extremes, is that though Untouchables may reject their own place in the system, they accept the principle of hierarchy on which it is based.

I argue that in order to delineate the shared and contested meanings of untouchability, it is necessary to follow the Gujarati semantic distinction between *abhadiva-vun* and *vativavuri* and make an analytical distinction between two kinds of pollution — 'natural' and 'social' (Randeria 1989). 'Natural' pollution is incurred through contact with organic impurities of life, especially death. 'Social' pollution results from the transgression of norms regarding the exchange of food, women, and services.

Upper castes consider the Untouchables to be naturally polluted on account of their impure occupations relating to dead cattle and human corpses. However, each of the untouchable castes believes its own untouchability to be the result of improper social exchange. The origin myths of these castes have as their *Leitmotiv* an act of 'social' pollution, i.e., their degradation from an originally high royal status. They tell of an ancestor who unknowingly accepted food, water, or a wife from an untouchable caste in dire circumstances, this leading to his fall and incorporation into that caste. Each caste's positive self-image rests on this claim of a higher status in the past. The origin myths of priests and genealogists tell the story of how they were commanded by the king to serve the Untouchables, who lacked castes of ritual specialists serving them. It is irrelevant whether such a claim has any historical validity. It is significant that these castes do not perceive their own pollution to be a natural state of affairs but conceive of it as rooted in an unintentional transgression or in an act of royal power.

Why, then, do I not accept the thesis that Untouchables have a subculture with a distinctive set of values? My reasons are twofold: (i) Each untouchable caste uses the categories of the upper-caste discourse in terms of purity, pollution, and association with animal death to rank the other untouchable castes. It only rejects this discourse for its own self-representation. (ii) The key element in each myth of origin, the idea of degradation through unwittingly incurred social pollution, is not a distinctive untouchable idea. The origin of many a sub-caste of Brahmans is explained in these terms in mythical Brahman caste-histories. To use a linguistic analogy, each untouchable caste shares the grammar of the dominant discourse, it uses the same lexical items but makes a semantic difference in the context of its own identity.

Each caste's own account in terms of social pollution stresses the historical contingency of the event, implying thereby its reversibility. The idea of a future that only re-establishes the past could be seen to imply a cyclical perspective rather than a linear view of time. Like the feminist myth of an original state of matriarchy, the untouchable myths of origin are also utopias of the powerless which are projected backwards in time. The upper castes' insistence that the death-related pollution of untouchable castes is natural (and hence permanent) denies Untouchables a higher status at any time in the past. More importantly, the upper caste discourse on untouchability is an attempt to "mythologize", to use Barthes's phrase, for it gives that which is cultural the appearance of being in the very nature of things. Seen from this perspective, the origin myths of the Untouchables are attempts at "demythologizing" the dominant discourse which portrays their untouchability as natural, inevitable, and changeless. As against this, the Untouchables claim in their myths that their present lowly status is historical, contingent, the result of human error or royal command and, therefore, reversible. In their opinion, one way to effect such a transformation is through the caste-based quotas which the government is obliged to give them in return for their political loyalty. The upper castes, however, see in such a redistributive gift the dangers of a potlatch.

Exchange, consumption and gifts of money

I argued at the outset that comparisons between India and the West are necessary for an understanding of both cultures. However, rather than seeing in India a mirror image of the West with hierarchy as its defining feature, I choose to look at it in terms of exchange, a feature which the Untouchables consider to be synonymous with social existence. Before turn-

ing to the contrast which they make between private, individual consumption, and public, socially approved exchange, I would like to point out some features of exchange in India with reference to gifts of money.

Like gifts in kind, money is not a neutral medium of prestation. It too contains and transmits the moral qualities of the giver. Untouchable priests and genealogists refuse to officiate at the marriages or death rituals of the cremation-ground attendants. They say that acceptance even of money from such low patrons would pollute them irremediably.

But money is not merely used to symbolize rank in the caste hierarchy. It carries a heavy symbolic load in the sphere of intra-caste prestations where it is exchanged freely among male members of a caste at all life-course rituals. Gifts of cash are usually given in odd-numbered sums (e.g., Rs 5, 21), the amount varying with the degree of structural nearness of the kin tie. Odd numbers are considered to be blemished and therefore less susceptible to the "evil eye". The wish to continue a relationship is expressed by giving a larger sum of money than the one received from the partner on a previous occasion. For example if, at his daughter's wedding, A received Rs 51 from B, he would make a return gift of Rs 101 when B's daughter marries, so that the old "debt" of Rs 51 is cancelled and a new one of Rs. 50 is incurred which B is obliged to repay in the future. Thus the exact sum of the present transaction is determined by a past gift, just as the present amount lays the basis of a future exchange.

Unlike Simmel's characterization of it, money is neither impersonal nor anonymous in the context of gift exchange in India. Its use as a gift does not depersonalize, dissolve or terminate social relations. On the contrary, different kinds of money gifts both reflect and constitute a variety of social relationships. At every marriage, pregnancy, or death ritual among the Untouchables gifts of money are publicly exchanged between the host family and three groups of its relatives: (i) The cash gifts from one's own lineage members must be returned on a similar occasion in the family of the giver; (ii) The cash gifts from the wife-takers are not only returned immediately but the sum of money given back is twice as much as that which one has received; (iii) Wife-givers, on the other hand, who bring jewellery, clothes and money for the hosts are given only clothes and a special meal in return the next day at the conclusion of the ceremony. Space does not permit me to go into two important aspects of these transactions — their temporality and embeddedness in different long- and short-term cycles of exchange, as well as the nature of a variety of other objects besides money which are also exchanged.

As Parry and Bloch (1989) have pointed out, in the West the awkwardness about offering money as a gift expressive of personal relationships is tied to the idea that "money signifies a sphere of 'economic' relationships

which are inherently impersonal, transitory, amoral, and calculating" (1989: 9). But money can be used to construct and represent social relations in India where, as Dumont has argued, the economy is not an autonomous domain. Being 'embedded' in society it does not represent the anti-thesis of caste and kin ties.

Let me take another example of a radical difference between India and the West, this time in the sphere of kinship. A little-known variant of the Oedipus myth from western India, which Ramanujan (1983) has documented, narrates the events from the point of view of the woman. It is prophesied for a young woman, that she will first marry a man from a low caste and then her own son of that union. As the inevitable events unfold, the woman is terribly ashamed of her hypogamous marriage, whereas she accepts the marriage with her own son as her fate.

This should in no way imply that incest in India is socially acceptable. That would indeed be impossible in a world which values exchange above all, for incest is the classic paradigm of the non-exchange of women. One of the most serious abuses among the Untouchables in Gujarat is to say of or to a man that he is "eating (or keeping) his own daughter", for it accuses him of consuming what he is obliged to exchange. Women are not only recipients of gifts, they are themselves gifts. In order to earn merit by giving gifts to a woman of one's own family, one must first give her away as a virgin gift in marriage. Depending on one's perspective, one could see this as a 'commoditization of women' (who are exchanged for a bride-price in the context of marriage) or a 'personalization of objects' (which share the qualities of their transactors) (Appadurai 1986). The strict separation of the person and the gift is, as Mauss has shown, a relatively recent phenomenon even in the West.

To insult a man by saying that he "eats his wealth, but does not feed it (to others)" is to accuse him of sheer immorality among the Untouchables. The purpose of wealth is not individual private consumption but redistribution among members of one's caste through exchange and public consumption. Just as it is a moral duty to give gifts to castes and women dependent on oneself, so is it a moral duty to use one's resources to arrange jobs and other favours for men of one's own family and caste. Villagers find nothing wrong in paying money for getting a job or some other favour. That is fair exchange, and, as they point out, it is not even possible to get potatoes without paying for them. What they consider morally inappropriate is when someone demands an unreasonable sum or "eats up" their money, i.e., having consumed it, fails to deliver the goods in return.

To consume one's own money, food, resources, or women would be to live in a world without social relations. Gift-exchange and public consumption engender social relationships, whereas individual private con-

sumption is barren. The mere use of resources for public consumption and exchange is no virtue, but a *sine qua non* of belonging to the community. Prestige is acquired through generosity in exchange, the number of guests feasted, the lavishness of the food served, the expensiveness of the gifts given and the money spent on a ritual occasion. To see extravagant feasting and large dowries as 'conspicuous consumption' and to forbid them by legislation, as the Indian government has unsuccessfully tried to do, is to miss the point entirely.

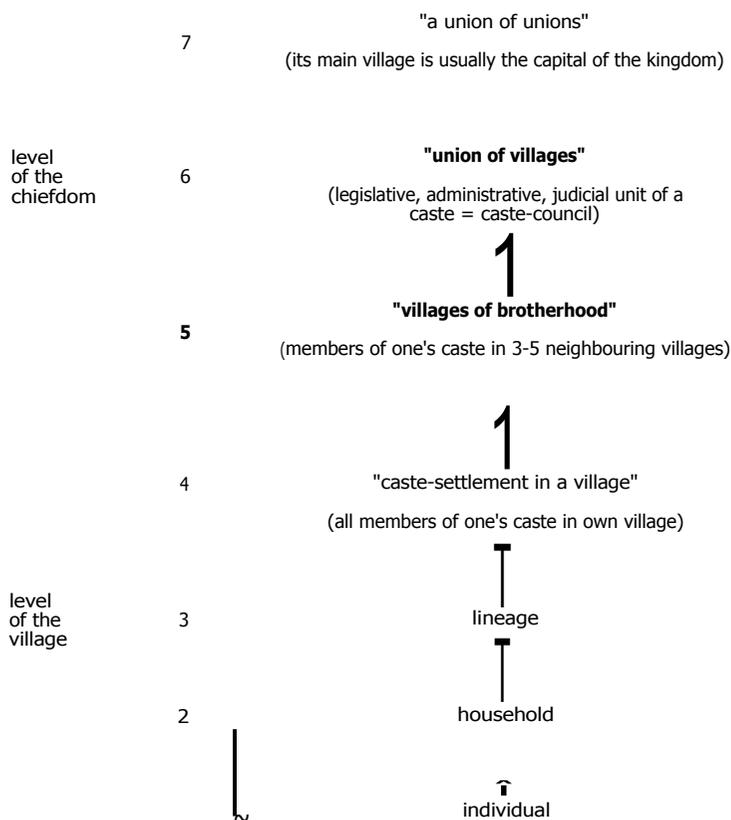


Figure 4: Caste, territory and exchange.

Untouchables consider only private consumption in the interest of the immediate family as wasteful, unproductive, illegitimate, motivated by greed and selfishness. Lavish public consumption on a socially sanctioned occasion, in which the entire community participates and its leaders supervise the food and gifts, is considered social, productive and moral. Affinal gift-exchange at various life course rituals and commemorative feasts all involve community participation and control at different levels (from levels 3 to 7 in the diagram below) depending on the scale of the celebration. Or to put it differently, the public feasts and intra-caste as well as inter-caste exchanges reflect and constitute the community at various levels in different ritual contexts.

To call such exchange conspicuous would be tautologous. Gifts, being public by their very definition, are usually exchanged on ritual occasions between groups of men seated outside the house. Each gift is announced by the priest, noted down in a book by a member of the receiving family and passed on to all those seated in the public arena, each of whom inspects it carefully and touches it to his forehead with reverence. Private exchange is a contradiction in terms. Secret transactions of money, over and above the publicly exchanged amounts laid down by the caste council, do take place in private among the same individuals. Men involved in such shady deals are morally condemned for taking 'bribes', and no one will admit to having either given or received one. Merit and prestige accrue to the giver of gifts, whereas the parties to an illicit secret transaction are judged to be greedy, selfish and immoral.

Untouchable culture, and the larger Hindu culture of which it partakes, is not unique in its emphasis on sociality as constituted through exchange and public consumption. What is perhaps specifically Hindu is the insistence on a sensitivity to the context of transactions and the nature of transactors (Ramanujan 1990). In this article "Is there an Indian way of thinking? An informal essay", Ramanujan narrates a myth which illustrates the importance of gifts and the relativity of castes and contexts for the Hindus. "Lord Prajapati speaks in thunder three times: 'DA, DA, DA'. When the gods, given to pleasure hear it, they hear it as the first syllable of *damyatâ*, 'control'. The antigods, given as they are to cruelty, hear it as *daya-dhvam*, 'be compassionate'. When the humans, given to greed, hear it, they hear it as *dattâ*, 'give to others'." (1990: 53).

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