

CONCEPT OF PURITY IN THE STUDIES OF THE INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM

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*The preoccupation of Hindus with their ritual purity was always noticed and observed by the visitors of India from the early days. This was also noted by the anthropologists studying India in the beginning of the 20th century (e.g. Bouglé in 1908). However no in-depth assessment of its implications on the essential social structure of India – caste system – was given in social anthropology until Louis Dumont formulated his landmark theory of the analysis of the Indian caste system in his *Homo Hierarchicus* (1966).*

It was Dumont who first claimed that it was not possible to explain the nature of the caste system without establishing an essential principle permeating all the visible features of the caste system (e.g. hierarchy, separation, division of labour). He concluded that such a principle was found in Hinduism and called it a fundamental opposition between purity and pollution.¹ This essential link between the caste system and Hinduism makes it impossible to have parallel analysis of Indian caste systems and non-Indian systems of strict social stratification which, as Dumont argued, could not and should not be called caste systems.

However in this article, without taking position on whether caste system can only be found in India, or it is a more general feature of human social organization, I would like to focus on Dumont's analysis of the concept of purity, its merits and shortcomings as well as the evolution of this concept in a post-Dumont Indian studies of social anthropology and Hindu perceptions as related to the changes in Hindu way of life. Finally, with the help of Dumont's critics I would try to make some assumptions on the possible future transformation of the popular concept of purity, basing my premises on the secondary information I received from my fieldwork on the stability and change of the caste system as well as on my personal experience of life in India.

What is purity?

To begin, Louis Dumont does not give any definition of the concept itself and its content. He says the notion of purity is rather like an immense umbrella [...] sheltering all sorts of things which we distinguish and which the Hindu himself does not confuse in all situations'.² Instead of at least attempting to give purity a more certain content, he analyses interplays of various relations of purity and impurity (which is understood as the absence of purity).

Dumont argues that this principle of the fundamental opposition of the pure and the impure permeates all the visible features of a caste system – hierarchy, separation and division

¹ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 43.

² *Ibid*, p. 60.

of labour,³ giving them their *raison d'être*. Castes are ranked according to their ritual purity; their contacts are limited in order to preserve the purity of the purer ones from the polluting effect of the impure; separation of labour is aimed at keeping pure and impure occupations apart as well as at enabling impure occupations to maintain the purity of the pure ones. As Dumont says, 'the whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites'.⁴

Precipitating the critique which would draw attention to the variety of caste ranking criteria and economic factor as a basis for the caste system, Dumont stresses that he does not claim this fundamental opposition to be the cause of the caste system, but rather that the former is the latter's form,⁵ giving the latter both its meaning and operational rules. Similarly, N. Jayaram proposes that caste as an institution operationalizes the central concepts of Hinduism, purity-pollution being one of them.⁶ Here we deal with the powerful religio-ideological level of the society which is strong enough to shape it and keep it stable. (But after discussing purity, its manifestations and criteria, we will have to come back to Dumont's critics to sum up his idea of purity.)

According to Dumont the Indian caste society is an example of perfect hierarchy in the latter's original – religious – meaning. Dumont defines a perfect hierarchy as 'the principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to their whole'.⁷ One of the main reasons why Hindu society is a perfect case of hierarchy is that in its caste system all the members of the caste society (that is to say, castes) are ranked according to their share of purity in relation to the pure whole – God or Absolute.

There can be two levels of purity or impurity in Hinduism – permanent and temporary. In the hierarchy castes are rated by their level of permanent purity. Men are born in a certain caste with a certain permanent degree of purity or impurity, according to which his caste is rated in relation to the other castes of the system, between the two extremes – Brahmin castes at the one end and the untouchable outcaste groups at the other end. Dumont says that most manifestly purity and impurity can be seen in the traditional occupations of the two extremes: Brahmans traditionally being priests or men of learning, knowledge, and Untouchables – cleaning, removing dead animals and serving the higher castes.

The other feature of the caste system – separation of castes – is essentially religious as well. Dumont notices that 'pure is powerless in face of the impure and only the sacred vanquishes it'.⁸ To ensure separation of pure and impure, all Hindu life and contacts between the people (ranging from family life to food regulations) are regulated by many rules

³ Dumont considers this definition of Bouglé as being the best in naming the main characteristics of the caste (*Ibid.*, p. 43).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁶ *Caste. It's Twentieth Century Avatar*, p. 74.

⁷ L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 66.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

formulated in ancient Hindu texts. A study of these texts regulating the life of an orthodox Hindu even these days can give useful information for anthropologists. Dumont also makes use of them.

If we go, for example, through the pages of the Dharmasūtras – The Law Code books of ancient India – we can easily see that they are most of all concerned with maintaining personal purity which is constantly threatened by various types of pollution. Here we deal mostly with the temporary purity or rather impurity – the one acquired or lost due to some natural organic events or external contacts. One can notice that personal purity is a very fluctuating state of being, subject to changing, diminishing, but as well as possible to recover if prescribed ‘remedies’ are wisely used. A person of the highest status, that is to say, with the highest degree of purity, is very susceptible to pollution, much more than the person of a lower caste, and Dharmasūtras mostly give advice to higher classes, especially Brahmins. Personal purity lowers down because of the contact with the polluting element which are death, birth, physical dirt, contact with a low-caste (even an eye-contact or shadow thrown by him), bad deed etc. This pollution is so common and frequent that after naming the polluting cases the law books immediately indicate purifying methods to be followed in each particular case: bath, sprinkling of water, shaving of a head, using cow products (which are sacred by nature therefore have strong purifying powers). E. g. *Dharmasūtra* of Gautama says: ‘When a man touches an outcaste, a Chandālā, a woman who has just given birth or menstruating, a corpse, or someone who has touched any of these, he becomes purified by bathing’.⁹

Coming back to social anthropology, Dumont uses the results of different fieldworks (especially E. A. H. Blunt in early 30’s) to analyse real life rules regulating contacts and separation which are not less strict as in the religious scriptures, but in fact even more rigid and complex.

He focuses especially on regulations organizing interchange of food and water. Even everyday food has to be cooked with lots of precautions and cannot be passed freely from one caste to another.¹⁰ Complexity of the rules also relates to the gradation of food products according to their purity and resistance to impurity. Raw food (fruits, general provisions) is practically immune to pollution, – therefore a Brahmin can accept a gift from an inferior caste without being polluted. Cooked food can be *kaccā* food (Hindi word meaning imperfect, not ripe) and *pakkā* (perfect, ready, ripe), the latter mostly being cooked in *ghi*, purified butter (one of the sacred products of a cow). While *kaccā* food can only be used among the members of the same endogamous group, and mostly by lower castes, *pakkā* food gives scope to some inter-caste commensality, therefore can be used for festivals or journeys. Blunt’s research shows that among 76 castes of the locality, 36 do not accept *kaccā* food prepared by others, while 10 castes accept *pakkā* only if it has been cooked by a member of their caste, by a guru, a confectioner or a member of their local water-bearer caste. Only 18 castes would accept

⁹ *Dharmasutras*, transl. by P. Olivelle, 1999, p. 102–103.

¹⁰ L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 139.

kaccā food from others.¹¹ Even though *pakkā* food can be eaten by nearly everybody, further restrictions would be applied at the festive dinner – timing and sitting arrangements would further separate castes of too different status. Less rigid but still complicated rules guide the acceptance of water from the hands of other castes. It should be noted that restrictions of commensality are even much stricter in South India where *pakkā* food did not exist and where a 1901 Census has registered Brahmins taking water from no other castes.¹²

The third main feature of the caste system – the division of labour – is also religious in essence, therefore the opposition of the pure and impure is at its basis too. This is so, because pure and impure jobs are very closely linked, – without the services of the impure castes the pure ones could not preserve their purity. Thanks to a washer-man who takes away dirty linen of a Brahmin, the latter can overcome his temporary organic impurity and regain his purity which is necessary to perform a ritual. And on the contrary, thanks to a Brahmin performing a Vedic sacrifice in his state of purity (or doing some other functions, like cooking for an inter-caste dining event which still require a high degree of purity), those present get their share of purity (or preserve it instead of losing) and the blessings of god. Therefore it is not simply the economic division of labour, but an essentially religious exchange of services by the people intrinsically connected to each other in their endeavours to reach absolute purity. Dumont concludes that ‘the impurity of the Untouchable is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahman’.¹³

What is interesting and what makes a general accidental contact so different from a specialized one in this religious exchange of services is that a lower caste person does not have a polluting effect while performing his duty to the higher caste. Dumont notes that a washerwoman (generally one of the lowest castes) does not pollute the house of the Brahmin when coming to do the laundry, but would pollute it badly if she entered the house for some other purpose.¹⁴ And in the Baudhāyana *Dharmasūtra* we read: ‘The hand of an artisan is always clean, as also goods displayed for sale. Almsfood received by a student is always pure’.¹⁵ This passage proves Dumont’s claim that a specialized contact in the interdependent system does not pollute as the religious duty has certain powers to win over pollution.

However in a complex society like India a specialized contact can be more than simply cleaning and can involve different groups of people into a wider community life, sometimes including non-Hindus. A very low-status Tamil untouchable group Parayar (Pariah) – drummers – dealing with leather (an extremely polluting material) drums are required at some village ceremonies.¹⁶ Some barbers of a very low caste serve as funerary priests in South

¹¹ L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 143.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133–134.

¹⁵ *Dharmasūtras*, p. 145.

¹⁶ L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 55.

India, and in other places a visit by Muslim eunuch singers (*hijras*) to a house where a baby has just been born is considered to be auspicious, and not carrying any pollution at this particular moment.

Dumont is rather critical of some of his colleagues' field research precisely for their lack of insight into this religious context of the caste relations. E.g. Dumont criticises Pauline Mahar Kolenda's study of the forms of contact which are ranked up to the most polluting contacts (from touching a child to serving food etc.),¹⁷ saying that this meticulously lined ranking ignores the purpose of the contacts studied, and fails to make this important distinction between contact of a general nature and a specialized contact which has a completely different effect on purity.

Physical or non-physical purity?

One of the main questions that arises about the essence of purity is whether it is based on physical or non physical substance. Dumont suggests that 'it is specialization in impure tasks, in practice or in theory, which leads to the attribution of a massive and permanent impurity to some categories of people'.¹⁸ In reality however, as we see, it may have two connotations – filthy nature of a task, and a permanently low moral standing of some professions.

In certain passages of the Dharmasūtras one can easily see the roots of impurity being physical. A contact with the corpse could be one of the examples, as a contact with a dog, a pig – animals who feed on human waste and live in filth.

Nonetheless, Dumont does not want to relate the categories of purity and impurity to a physical realm, though he acknowledges a certain relation. He compares the etiquette of purity to 'culture, civilization', in the sense of a way for a cultured man to deal with nature.¹⁹ Following H. N. C. Stevenson, Dumont has defined impurity as "irruption of the biological into social life".²⁰

Stevenson researched the Hindu concept of impurity and based it on physical realm. In his fieldwork he noted that pollution is caused by human biological functions which result in bodily waste: all bodily excretions, nail clippings, cut hair and especially dead body. Hindu scriptures do confirm that pollution could have a physical beginning, as all living and unliving substances are rated according to their level of purity. Some relation of purity to a physical realm can also be seen in the ethics of preparation of food and the separation between *kaccā* and *pakkā* food.

But even in the scriptures we see that this link is not direct at all. The way death of a man affects his kin is not related to their physical proximity. According to the *Dharmasūtra* of

¹⁷ L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 133.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁰ *Religion in India*, ed. by T. Madan, p. 79.

Baudhāyana, death of a person pollutes all people belonging to the same ancestry, which relates people down to the seventh generation, and the period of impurity for them lasts ten days²¹. But among those affected are also other people who were close to the deceased but have no blood relations with him.²² A relative who is away from his family (therefore has no physical proximity to the dead body) is also affected, but starting from the day he learned about the death. Due to distance or absence of blood relations, these two latter categories are affected less, their impurity lasts shorter.²³ Here non-physical aspect of pollution clearly prevails.

More so, there are always certain categories of people who are not affected by the contact with death or less affected despite having ancestral relation to a deceased. *Dharmasutra* of Baudhāyana says that a priest officiating at the funeral is not affected by pollution,²⁴ – in this specific situation performing his duty he is not only immune to this polluting agent, but also helps to reduce the pollution of those affected. Using the term of Dumont, one could call it a specialized immunity to pollution because of a duty performed. Likewise a relative of the deceased, being a student of Vedas, is very little affected by this pollution, as well as Vedic scholar living nearby – these two categories, according to the *Dharmasutra* of Gautama remain impure only one day,²⁵ as they apparently have some purifying agent – Vedas – around them. As suggested by Dumont, the sacred has a special power over impurity.

Whatever are the associations of lower castes with their dirty occupations or low hygiene, one must not forget that according to Hindu belief the current life of a person is a result of a moral activity of his previous life, his fruits of *karma*. Therefore the low status and possible filthiness of lower castes is not a cause, but a result of earlier bad moral performance – out of here comes their polluting effect. Hindu Law books also indicate that an immoral person of whatever caste is equally polluting this life as a low-caste. *Dharmasūtra* of Apastambha says: ‘Social interaction with outcastes is not permitted, as also with degraded people’ and later enumerates the sins that make people sordid²⁶ – it clearly indicated that the opposition of purity and pollution is based rather on the moral value judgement while having biological realm somewhere at the roots.

Still unable to define the essence of purity in the theory of Louis Dumont, I find the approaches of McKim Marriott and Ronald Inden extremely enlightening. They tried to reconstruct the ‘insiders’ model of Hindu social system by studying Hindu holy books and folklore. They proposed that social anthropology took into account the fact that Hindus’ way of thought was monistic: no separation of body from mind is done, a person is considered as

²¹ *Dharmasūtras*, p. 149.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 151.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

an inherited single coded substance, where his inborn, inherent features and personality are woven into one.²⁷ This 'one' represents 'internal formulae' for person's appropriate conduct and duties. What is relevant to purity here is that each smallest particle of the human body (present in any bodily waste and contact) contains the substance of a particular person. These particles of lower caste persons carry pollution which is to be avoided, but the particles of higher caste persons or gods are wanted as they improve the composition of a given coded substance. This explains why a Hindu has to go through eternal strive to protect, maintain and uplift his purity.

Continuing in the same direction of 'natives', 'insiders' view, Marvin Davis went deeper into the nature of those coded substances. After doing his fieldwork with the Hindus of West Bengal and studying holy Hindu scriptures, he came up with the theory of three basic materials (*gun*) forming all the beings from gods to minerals: *sattvagun*, *rajogun* and *tamogun*. This axial construct of Indian philosophy and psychology was thus for the first time used in social anthropology to substantiate ranking of all the human beings in the caste system as well as non-living beings that cause pollution according to their composition. While all the *guns* are in full balance in the supreme being of a Hindu universe (Brahman), all the other beings, including gods, humans, animals, plants, have one of the *gun* dominating: *sattvagun* (white substance meaning purity and goodness) being predominant in gods and Brahmins, *rajogun* (red substance meaning activity, emotions and violence) – in Ksatriyas, demons and most of animals, *tamogun* (black substance implying darkness, stupidity and all sorts of basic behaviour) – in Sudras and Untouchables as well as plants.²⁸ In the opinion of Pauline Koleda, this theory is largely in line with Dumont's principle of purity and impurity, *sattvagun* and *tamogun* corresponding to purity and impurity, while *rajogun* – activating the other two. Different proportions of *guns* in a caste are related to all the caste activity: diet (as all the food also has one of the *guns* dominating), work, lifestyle, inter-caste communication, marriage patterns. By belonging to one of the castes and by organizing his contacts, a person has both permanent and temporary purity or pollution in him.²⁹

What differs here from Dumont's point of view is that neither castes nor persons have permanently fixed coded substances. As the coded substances interact via their particles, it is possible to change a relation of purity and pollution. Therefore persons strive to improve their admixtures of *guns* and their status in the hierarchy through eating food, taking up activities which have more *sattvagun* (these would be activities relating to a sacred realm – rituals, meditation and learning) or going for a marriage alliance with a representative of a caste with a slightly higher *gun*.

²⁷ *Religion in India*, p. 83.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85–86.

Relativity of purity and pollution

Dumont rightly indicates the complexity and relativity of purity. Apart from absolute purity which is God, mundane purity and pollution do not have any concrete content but are rather a ranked relation of something to something other. Yet how do we know what is what? Earlier I quoted Dumont saying that purity consists of 'all sorts of things [...] which the Hindu himself does not confuse in all situations'.³⁰ But Dumont himself is unable to answer the question what gives a Hindu a guidance not to confuse things.

Relativity is firstly revealed when it is seen that an object does not have permanent polluting effect attached to it. Even the scriptures acknowledge that an object can pollute one person, but be harmless to another. *Dharmasūtra* of Baudhāyana say: 'One's own bed, seat, clothes, wife, children and water pot are pure with respect to oneself; but they are impure vis-a-vis others'.³¹ What has an effect of purity for the Brahman, does not have such attribute for another caste.

Second, there are situations, when a man is especially vulnerable to pollution, therefore separate precautions have to be taken, e. g., when eating or sleeping. An eating Brahmin can be polluted even by a person otherwise equal to him in status but not purified specially for eating at this particular moment. Eating is an act for which person's purity has to be reinforced – a Brahmin has to take a bath and dress specially.³² Other castes do not have such vulnerability and no such strict rules of separation.

Similarly there are other situations where purity of a person has to be 'reinforced'. This is what M. N. Srinivasan called 'a state of ritual purity' (distinguished from a state of 'normal purity'),³³ required to reach before going into contact with the sacred, e. g. entering the temple. I have observed and witnessed a variety of situations related to this. A Tamil Brahmin has explained to me that when entering a temple in Rameshwaram every man had to be dressed in white (a colour of purity) traditional dress, otherwise they would be refused entry. In another temple nearby no such strict dress code was observed. Later on my Brahmin friend told me he wanted to wear a white T-shirt during his meeting with a holy person – Shankaracharya of Kanchi. He was not at all concerned that this was a non-Indian dress as such, but still mindful about its colour which for him had a reinforcing effect on the quality of the meeting. I was strictly checked for not carrying any leather objects before entering one of the temples in Bhubaneswar, Orissa, while this restriction was not applied in the neighbouring temple several meters away.

Third, in reality there are no clear criteria about who can share what and who has to avoid whom. On the basis of the research done on food, water and pipe sharing among different

³⁰ L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 60.

³¹ *Dharmasūtras*, p. 145.

³² L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 138.

³³ *Religion in India*, p. 79.

Hindu castes, Dumont emphasizes that in particular situations levels of separation are very different. He gives an example of three untouchable castes which are also untouchable by one another.³⁴ He concludes that speaking generally about India there are no universal criteria. The only thing that remains definitely in place, according to Dumont, is the preoccupation to protect oneself from pollution in order that the absolute hierarchy is preserved, even among the lowest castes.

Dumont acknowledges that because of this multiplicity and the relativity of the criteria of purity it is immensely difficult to have the linear ranking of the castes in the system. But for him all this complexity is not that important. He says that the linear order of castes is just a by-product of the hierarchical principle³⁵ which is the most important thing. Yet he says that 'each group protects itself from the one below and not at all from the one above',³⁶ which indicates that the linear order should be still governing the behaviour of men at least on practical terms. Later in a chapter called 'Variants and anomalies' he gives an exactly contradicting case: 'the Pallar Untouchables of the Tamil village believe that if the Brahman were to enter the Pallar hamlet he and all the Pallar would fall prey to illness and misery',³⁷

To sum up, the effects, a variety of situations and the criteria of purity and impurity seem to be very relative in their application. This relativity in fact seriously questions Dumont's conclusion of uniqueness and stability of this fundamental opposition of purity and pollution in today's India. In this I tend to agree with Dumont's critics that not only his analysis of the Indian caste system limits itself to its stability aspect and its classical ideal form based on a Brahmanic point of view of the Hindu scriptures, but also that this fundamental relation of a caste system with Hinduism is not enough for a full view of the caste system in its modern form.

In order to understand how these contradictions and relativities can be explained we have to see the concept of purity not as a dogma fixed in Hindu scriptures created more than 2000 years ago, but rather as a living concept of a living religion and vibrating culture.

Indeed what earlier Dumont hinted about, refusing to define purity and simply putting into it 'all sorts of things which Hindus himself never confuse', seems to me to refer to the concept of culture. Even if we use here the concept of coded substances (*gun*) of M. Harris, broadly speaking *guns* are Hindu cultural parameters. If it is for a Hindu to fill the concept of purity with a specific content, this indefinable framework of purity and pollution can be called Hindu culture, a Hindu way of life (and not Hindu religious doctrine, which Dumont tends to reduce to the fundamental opposition between purity and pollution), all the relativities and contradictions coming out of interpretations of the Hindu religious doctrine. With certain changes in the Hindu way of life and Hindu culture there are obvious changes in criteria of ranking of the castes.

³⁴ L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 136.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Evolution of Hindu way of life and its possible effects on the concept of purity

Dumont himself acknowledged that times were changing, bringing in more lax rules of caste separation. More than 30 years after Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* these changes are even more visible and dynamic. Nowadays Untouchables are much less segregated, their restrictions on temple entry have been abandoned, and positive discrimination gives them chances to take up occupations they had never taken before. Then, as N. Jayaram claims, because of modernization of Hindu rules and democratisation of Hinduism, with the facilitating role of media, lower castes came to a closer contact with the 'great tradition' of Hinduism.³⁸

However even on the empirical level the preoccupation with purity in India still remains part of everyday culture and precautions against ritual pollution constitute a significant part of daily activities. Rigidity of Hinduism can also be seen on the level of Hindu–non-Hindu relations where certain spheres still remain beyond the reach of non-Hindus. While day-to-day contacts with a non-Hindu (eating, exchanging objects and services) are not explicitly restricted, most of the restrictions are applied in relation to religion, sacred Hindu realm, like entering some temples, holy places and taking part in some religious rituals. We should not forget that according to the orthodox view no conversion to Hinduism is possible, therefore a non-Hindu traditionally is an absolute outsider in a ritual-related space. As a non-Hindu in the very traditional environment of the most of South Indian temples and some very important temples in the North, I would be usually allowed only into the first corridor of the temple (where the salesmen are allowed to keep their stalls) but strictly forbidden to go further into a sacred space.

If we interpret this ban in Dumont's term, not belonging to the caste system a non-Hindu personifies impurity and therefore infringes upon the realm of Hindu purity. However once, before entering the main temple of Rameshwaram with the Tamil Brahmin family and after undergoing ritual purification, sprinkling water on our feet, I was addressed by my Indian friend with a friendly joke: 'Yet you are still beyond purification'. I felt it was a more correct wording of the situation: in the opposition between purity and pollution I simply do not exist, being rather 'beyond' these categories.

No doubt, more intense contacts with the West and non-Indian non-Hindus play a role in relaxing this rigidity. Even the temple entry ban is not a universal restriction these days. There are equally holy places that do not have so many or any barriers for non-Hindus, or they are again treated relatively. For example, I was allowed into the Durga temple in Varanasi which had a notice 'No entry for non-Hindus'. As the temple keeper explained to me this was the temple of women, therefore any female could go in, while a non-Hindu man would not be allowed to enter. The only 'barrier' I had to overcome while visiting the famous Ven-

³⁸ *Caste. It's Twentieth Century Avatar*, p. 76.

kateshwara temple in Tirumala (not mentioning a half-day long queue) was a declaration to be signed by all non-Hindu visitors committing themselves to decent behaviour and respect for religious symbols. In a very important Shiva temple – Arunachaleswarar in Thiruvannamalai (which is however quite far from a tourist trail) the temple guardian did not even understand what I meant by asking him ‘Am I allowed inside?’. It was clear to me from his reply that he was not aware of non-Hindus being barred from visiting the temple. After entering this temple I was struck by the fact that I remained completely unnoticed by other devotees while paying my respects and doing a *darsan* of the deity.

Frankly, often seeing the tourists in the holy Hindu places, I felt that the motive behind the ban for a non-Hindus to enter temples was quite understandable – a natural wish of the orthodox yet sincere believers to protect the sacred space from intruding (one could say, polluting) regard of a curious tourist who wants to touch the tusk of Lord Ganesha or a sacred lingam, but barely cares to take off shoes and has no clue about the sanctity of the place.

These personal experiences and observations on the variety of customs regarding access to a temple for non-Hindus makes me once again reconfirm a rather relative separation of purity and pollution in today’s Hindu life and also testimony changes in a once orthodox system.

After the reformist neo-Hindu movements played a revolutionary role in the 19th century India, opening up Hindu wisdom to the West, and fighting against the most exploiting phenomena of Hinduism, there have been controversial processes in India which have both upheld and weakened caste system at the same time. Continuing Sanskritization³⁹ endorsed the caste system with its attempt to emulate high class purity, while legal measures adopted by the British and later modern Indian authorities attempted eradicating the caste. With today’s globalisation and developments of media and information technology again there are contradicting trends. As N. Jayaram suggests, among the latest socio-political developments in India two of them have crucially shaped relationship between Hinduism and the caste system. First, the decision of the Government of India in the early 90’s to implement special recommendations on reservation of jobs in favour of the backward castes (so called Mandal Commission recommendations) which in fact only strengthened caste mentality and caste politics. Second, the project of the radical Hindu party ‘Vishwa Hindu Parishad’ in the late 80’s to reclaim the disputed land in Ayodhya, the supposed birthplace of God Rama and to build a Rama temple in the place of the Babri Masjid mosque. First of all this second development led to the bloody events of 1992 when violent mobs attacked and demolished the Babri mosque spreading communal violence all over India and spilling into neighbouring countries. But at the same time it also started a new movement aimed at uniting Hindus, establishing a proud Hindu nation based on equality and not on caste barriers.⁴⁰ This

³⁹ The term proposed by M. N. Srinivas to denote the process of imitating customs, rituals, ideology and lifestyle of higher castes by lower castes in order to improve the latter’s position in the caste hierarchy (*Caste. It’s Twentieth Century Avatar*, p. 77).

⁴⁰ *Caste. It’s Twentieth Century Avatar*, p. 69.

movement, a call for new post-secular nationalism based on a Hindu identity, though started by radicals, reached the minds of extremely liberal and tolerant circles of educated Hindus who understood it as a signal for reinterpreting Hindu spiritual heritage in a modern, acceptable and attractive way. It is new in a sense that it calls not only for a caste inequality to be abolished among Hindus, but also for opening Hinduism to anyone who appreciates and believes its wisdom and proves his dedication. It is being widely shared, and not only in the discussions around a cup of tea, but in practice. I also witnessed several cases of my Hindu friends arguing fervently with the temple guards who had refused me an entry into a temple, saying that the time has come for Hindus to change this. All these changes lead to reinterpretation of traditional ideology, concept of purity included.

Some of Dumont's critics blankly suggested to reinterpret caste system in more economic terms, as they saw economic aspects of the caste system as being more important (dominant caste, jajmani system of exchanges in services etc.) For instance, McKim Marriott suggested replacing purity and pollution relation with a giver-receiver / server-served relation according to which castes are ranked.⁴¹ I would still agree with P. Kolenda that these two aspects can be reconciled as two sides of the same phenomenon, and that economic aspect is profoundly influenced by the ideology of Hinduism. Therefore to project changes of the concept of purity we have from the major changes in practical Hinduism.

Dumont has predicted that 'untouchability will not truly disappear until the purity of the Brahmin is itself radically devalued'.⁴² I would presume that what is currently happening with the concept of purity in a popular Hindu mind is not necessarily its devaluation, but a certain de-sacralization, a shift in its content from a religiously interpreted 'coded substance' to either a 'cultural institution' or 'a moral ideal'.

I was led to these assumptions when doing my fieldwork on the caste identification of the Hindus living in the West (2001–2002). Without claiming that they represented mainstream Hindu thinking, on the contrary, I presumed that they might signal possible further developments of the caste system, being a kind of 'advance' or 'forecast' group. Some of the views expressed by the 'informants' were relevant to the changes of the concept of purity and are a mixture of their assessment of the situation and their wishes.

While all of the informants agreed that traditional aspect of inequality of the caste system would have to disappear and people would be ranked according the modern universal criteria of education and economic welfare, they forecasted the fate of the caste in two different ways. There was one group of informants who associated the future of the castes with a certain framework of values that would provide Hindu people with moral ideals and orientations which could be followed by a person independently of his status by birth (e.g. Brahmin ideal orients people to seek education, wisdom, highly spiritual and moral life, Vaisya ideal – to be a good businessman, Ksatriya – bravery, endurance etc.).

⁴¹ *Religion in India*, p. 92

⁴² L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 54.

Therefore my first assumption would be that the caste system would lose its traditional ranking by inborn purity and would become a model of moral values and ideals, where ritual purity becomes moral virtue. This possible model role of the caste system is closely related to the movement for the Hindu unity discussed above. An excellent example of this first tendency could be the Navyashasta movement aimed at reforming Hindu society both in its normative and practical level. On the web page of this movement (www.shastras.org) one finds a call to rewrite traditional books of Hindu Law reinterpreting them in such a way which would entitle all the groups currently subject to inequality, e.g. low castes, outcastes, women, converts etc., to the access to the studies of Hindu sacred books, religious wisdom and this way to culminate with a casteless society. In the Navyashastra articles and discussion groups I also found proposals to take from the caste system its best features, and to abolish the unjust ones. One of the proposals is to confirm a new definition for a Brahmin, so that the name would no longer be a formality, but imply high moral substance:

Any Hindu (or convert to Hinduism) is entitled to be called a Brahmin if he / she: (a) Makes honest efforts to live up to the highest ideals of Fairness and Justice. (b) Has a commitment for knowledge and learning. (c) Assists others in the observance of important milestones in life's journey.* (d) Respects life forms to the point of being a vegetarian as far as possible. (e) Has learnt some basic prayers/mantras of the Hindu tradition, in Sanskrit or on Tamil.* (f) Respects all faiths in so far as they don't harm or hurt others. (g) Spends a few minutes each day meditating on the Cosmic Substratum of the Universe (Brahman). (h) Refrains as much as possible from using harsh and unkind words to or about others. (i) Spends some time each week in the service of others. (j) Leads a life of self-discipline. (Quote from a contribution by prof. V. V. Raman, 11/28/02).

The idea still springs from the understanding that Brahmin is the highest (using Dumont's words, the purest) category of the Hindu society. But this new definition, supported by the reinterpreted Hindu Law books would make it a title which has to and can be deserved by anyone worth it. The content or the substance of this type of purity is the moral standing of the person which is by no means related to his birth or profession. In this sense the new hierarchy in the Hindu society would retain its traditional structure, ranking the groups of people according to their degree of closeness to this Brahmanic ideal, but a birth-based and collective value judgement (which is dependant on a coded-substance of traditional Hinduism) would be replaced with the modern individual moral value judgement. However this ranking would only be relevant to a person's spiritual life, and not his status in the society.

There was another group of informants who maintained that even after abolishing the discriminating aspect of the caste system, a member of different castes would still retain very substantial differences. They thought that after losing the traditional function of ranking, the caste system would become the system of cultural differences without any ranking. This could usefully serve people as a sort of catalogue or inventory of identities and cultural differences, a practical tool for such a diverse nation of the vast Indian subcontinent to facilitate their communication, build friendships, find marriage partners (many informants especially emphasized practical advantages of marriage between individuals of similar castes).

Therefore my second assumption is to predict that the caste system might transform itself into a mosaic of cultural identities, labels, a catalogue of cultural groups. Here we have to remember that historically Hinduism did play such a role, and the caste system may have come into being as a sophisticated mechanism of reconciliation of different cultures. In the absence of either a political union of Hindu territories or a single religious organization, caste system with its strict and complex regulations has definitively played an organizing role, incorporating amazing variety of cultures and subcultures into this very vast realm of Hinduism. However, acknowledging the framework, the ideological principle of the caste system, never did the numerous castes completely agree to a status imposed on them by a 'great tradition', therefore they cherished their cultural differences to justify or correct their status.

To substantiate my second assumption I found the theory of Dipankar Gupta very useful. Gupta indicates that in reality each group in a caste system views the hierarchy from their own point of view, – while generally everyone accepts hierarchy as a principle, a model, lower castes however do not agree on placing themselves at the lower end. Gupta says that castes are discreet categories which form multiple hierarchies.⁴³ While these multiple hierarchies are modelled on the ideal hierarchy, or to translate it into Dumont's language, on the ranking of their elements according to their share of purity, castes disagree on the exact 'amount' of purity and impurity in different castes. Many examples can be given of different caste origin stories which explain the downfall of the caste because of others' treachery, evil will, somebody's sin, etc.⁴⁴ Therefore Gupta proposes to understand the opposition of purity and pollution not as the ideology, but as the common value which is shared by many caste ideologies.⁴⁵ These discrete caste ideologies 'translate pure values into empirical categories in order to provide guidelines on the ground,⁴⁶ – they substantiate caste differences and guide members of different castes in separating themselves from the 'other'.

Gupta notes that in reality purity and impurity as such matter mostly in food and inter-dining, but in other situations it is mainly 'otherness' that keeps caste separation,⁴⁷ therefore at the everyday level ritual purity takes the form of 'otherness'. Caste legends also teach people to take pride in their 'otherness', their cultural identity which is encoded by their symbols. Even the lowest castes are proud about their cultural differences, they do not want to lose them and look down upon those who do that. Gupta quotes the leader of the Yataav movement (a low caste group) as saying: 'We do not want to be absorbed into others (caste and religion) and thereby lose our identity...'⁴⁸ This person, who, as we could guess, fights

⁴³ Dipankar Gupta, *Interrogating Caste*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

against the oppression of his caste, therefore possibly rejects the value of the concept of purity and interprets the cultural identity of his caste as a value. This confirms precisely what some of my informants have told me: after the traditional caste inequality has been overcome, caste might remain as a cultural institution, and cultural identities of castes might become values in themselves, without the necessity and possibility of ranking them.

In this article I did not aim at reaching substantial conclusions, but rather to confirm the extent of the changes occurring in the interpretation of the concept of purity in social anthropology of India as well as in the popular Hindu perceptions.

First, as rightly pointed out by Louis Dumont, it is clear that the Hindu concept of the opposition of purity and pollution played a very significant role in establishing and maintaining the caste system in India. However, taking into account both regional variations, plurality and relativity of criteria of purity and pollution, this opposition is not enough to substantiate this extremely complex phenomenon. Neither can Hinduism be reduced to this fundamental opposition, nor economic factors to be ignored in the development of the caste system. I would agree with Gupta who claims that in reality the concept of purity can be defined as a common value, which is put into life through a variety of ideologies, coded symbols, all of which come under a broad definition of Hindu culture.

Secondly, the changes in the Hindu way of life bring in significant corrections into the caste system, therefore one could expect the substance of the concept of purity to be changed or reinterpreted by Hindus. My two assumptions on the possible transformation of the substance of purity into either 'a moral ideal' or 'cultural institution' are just some very preliminary reflections which definitely require more serious field studies.

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ŠVARUMO KONCEPCIJA INDIJOS KASTŲ SISTEMOS STUDIJOSE**Diana Mickevičienė****S a n t r a u k a**

Straipsnyje analizuojama hindų ritualinio švarumo koncepcija, kurią socialinėje antropologijoje pirmasis suformulavo Louis Dumontas, teigęs, jog pagrindinis kastų sistemos principas yra ritualinio švarumo – nešvarumo principas, slypintis hinduizmo religijoje, ir pagrindžiantis Indijos kastų sistemos bruožus. Siekiama išsiaiškinti, kas hindų kultūroje nulemia švarumo esmę, jo turinį, kokie yra Dumonto koncepcijos pranašumai bei trūkumai, kuriuos atskleidė Dumonto kritikai bei šiuolaikiniame populiarijame hinduizme vykstantys pokyčiai. Remiantis asmeniniais lauko tyrimais daromos preliminarios prielaidos, kokia kryptimi galėtų toliau kisti ritualinio švarumo koncepcija šiuolaikinių hindų interpretacijose apie kastų sistemos ateitį.

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