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## Harald Tambs-Lyche. *Transactions and Hierarchy: Elements for a Theory of Caste*

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# Harald Tambs-Lyche. *Transactions and Hierarchy: Elements for a Theory of Caste*

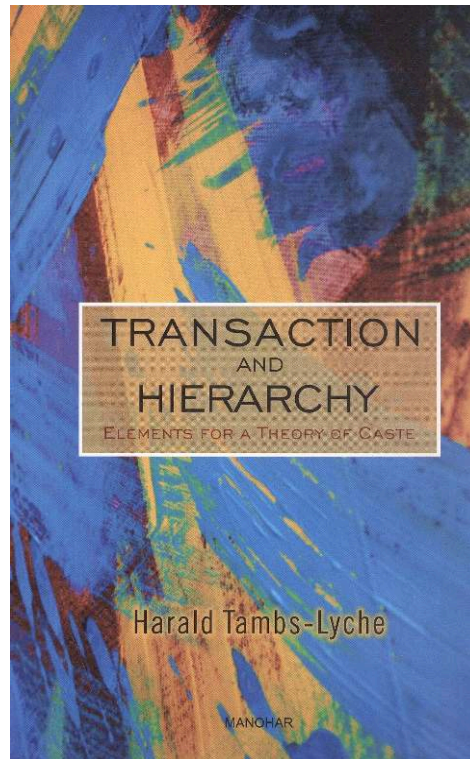
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## REFERENCES

Harald Tambs-Lyche. 2017. *Transactions and Hierarchy: Elements for a Theory of Caste*. Delhi: Manohar. 375 pages.

1 In this book, Harald Tambs-Lyche generalizes an idea that he has developed over the course of his career (notably in *A Good Country* 2004), combining an overall sociological perspective on Indian castes, inspired initially by Fredrik Barth, with a minute ethnography of social interactions in Saurashtra, a region of Gujarat. Because of his varied fieldwork experiences, Tambs-Lyche is deeply attentive to the internal diversity of India. The book first addresses the issue from a historical perspective, before delving into the sociology of caste clusters and the variety of discourses of hierarchization, also highlighting the fact that Indian society is a field of forces more than a harmonious structure—a lesson that is unfortunately very relevant to the present.



2 The “Preliminaries” return to the biggest objections raised against the very topic of castes, including the idea that castes are disappearing, or that they are a product of colonialism. As the author reminds us, Peabody (2017) has shown that caste-based census was actually used by some Indian kingdoms from the beginning of the modern period. Tambs-Lyche discusses the work of major caste theorists (Ghurye, Srinivas, Mayer, Bailey, Bêteille, Dumont and McKim Marriott), praising in particular the approach of MacKim Marriott and the interactionists (Bailey, Berreman, Barth). Unlike structuralists and functionalists, the later focused less on stable institutions than on inter-individual interactions and auto-representations, as well as on comparisons on various scales. While criticizing Dumont for having generalized a Brahmano-centric model of the caste system (see also Tambs-Lyche 2017:267–70), he praises his effort to formulate a sociological as well as *cultural* theory of the castes, paying attention to the “indigenous discourse” and the values espoused by the people under scrutiny. These are also the goals he sets for his own work (p. 28).

3 The second chapter distinguishes the *history of social stratification* in India from the *development of a conceptual model* that rationalizes this stratification. According to the authors he quotes (notably Jaiswal, Kosambi), he situates the *varna* division at the end of the Vedic period, even though it becomes more systematic in the *Arthashastra* (circa 300 BCE). However, references to castes (*jāti*) did not spread until the first centuries of our era, and their normative theorization takes shape in the *Manusmṛti* (c. 100 CE), which the author calls “a ‘caste order manifesto,’” inscribing the *jāti* in the hierarchy of the *varna*, under a strict determinism of birth. The “pure” superiority of Brahmins is also claimed, the lowered castes are despised because they are seen as born from “mixed marriages.” He underlines the political dimension of this text, as certain passages are clearly dialogically engaged with different views (egalitarian, or contesting the birth determinism in favor of life achievement) supported by other

factions of the population (for ex. traders or rulers of various origins). A genuine “integration” of diverse ethnic and social groups into a “caste system” would not take place until the Gupta period (4–5<sup>th</sup> century CE), and it follows paths which are very diverse, both historically and geographically.

- 4 Taking up again the question of Indian conceptions of the individual and of a non-essentialized self, H. Tambs-Lyche mobilizes his field experience before pointing to philosophical texts, like the *Bhagavat Gita*, as expressing well (not determining) the negotiations between one’s social role and duty (*dharma*), and the self/soul (*atma*, p. 69). He then returns to his fieldwork observations of interactions in everyday situations (bus, train), in which Indian individuals try to “maximize their interactions” that benefit their own status and interests. In chapter 3, the author shows well that “The ideal in Saurashtra seems to be the ability to deal with all kinds of situations in their own terms.” This ideal is embodied particularly well by “the direct/simple man” (*siddhu manos*) (p. 87). This adaptability, valued all over India (see also A.K. Ramanujan’s idea of “context-sensitive” ethics and rules), which plays on rank relations as well as personal interests, but also on appropriate contexts, seems to be diametrically opposed to the abstract “consistency” (rejecting “hypocrisy”) of Protestant morality embedded in the Kantian Moral Philosophy (a point Max Weber noted when defining the *dharma* as an ethics of particular status against the ideal of “Natural law”). From this Self, which I would call “situational,” the author shows that the community of “we,” comparatively strong in India, always places the individual in a family and a local caste segment, in which he or she may feel safer, when faced with other networks or regions populated by strangers... Finally, the word *jāti* itself is very polysemic, and constitutes a manner of speaking, a way of classifying, grouping together extremely diverse cases in terms of number and composition (farmers divided into three class positions: dominant landowners, tenants, laborers; untouchables but also Brahmins with very diverse situations, etc.). In short, castes are too diverse to constitute a single system, nor a simple unit of analysis.
- 5 But instead of throwing the baby out with the bath water, the author provides elements for a theory (of caste) from caste clusters or “Estates” (from the Weberian notion of *Stand*, social rank or statutory groups including different professions, wider than the economic definition of class) designating here “culturally recognized sections of society whose interests, moreover, are different and potentially opposed” in a given area marked by a particular history (chapter 4, p. 124). This notion allows him to shed light on the socio-economic dynamics of regional histories, but obviously does not claim to account for the details of any caste. In Saurashtra, he distinguishes between two major interest groups: the *Darbar* or dominant peasant castes, who often have martial values and offer up sacrifices to warrior goddesses, and the *Vania* or merchants, with rather non-violent values (Vaishnavite or Jain). Other important groups are the non-dominant farmers (*kheduts*), whose interests are more or less opposed to the dominant ones, depending on their central or peripheral location vis-à-vis the core area; the pastoralists (*maldharis*); the artisans, without strong bonds to the land; the *Charans*, buffalo herders (who provide the sacrificial buffaloes) but also former royal bards, who have a sacred status. Conversely, according to the author, Brahmins and untouchables were formerly too diverse in Saurashtra to constitute *Estates* as such, but the situation obviously changed with the formation of an enlightened “nationalist bourgeoisie”

combining Brahmins and merchants on the one hand, and more recently the Dalit movement on the other.

- 6 Tambs-Lyche then offers comparisons with the social positions of such interest groups in the Praj, South Kanara (Mangalore region), Tamil Nadu, Sundarbans, etc. (chapter 5). He shows that the integration into caste regional relations was also a matter of power, mainly based on “imposed consensus” (Béteille), where force, if not violence, was everywhere. On the other hand, one way to avoid such pressure was to reach the forest peripheries. A different but interesting development concerns the relationship between usurer and borrower (drawing from D. Hardiman’s work), which was asymmetrical, but aimed at a kind of perpetual indebtedness, before the colonial regime generalized a capitalist and land tenure logic that opened up the possibility for usurers to dispossess peasants of their lands, initiating cycles of violence. Finally, the author discusses two regional examples where castes clearly play a role in politics as interest and pressure groups, in Kanara country and Gujarat.
- 7 Chapter 6 focuses on the king and urban societies. The author first distinguishes various forms of kingship in medieval and modern North India, then in South India (following B. Stein), before proposing his own tentative typology, which is also a historical schematization:
  - the “tribal” chieftaincy where the chief remains *primus inter pares* in a kinship-based society;
  - the tribal-king alliance in which the latter is imagined as a foreigner;
  - the rajput model with a warrior clan imposing itself as an aristocratic caste on other groups, which are divided into peasant and artisan castes, themselves distinguished from servants;
  - the moral kingship of Jain inspiration;
  - the Pallava ritual royalty, centered on a temple and a body of Brahmins receiving land rights.
- 8 The author thus shows that the relationships between the kings and the social groups vary according to their main population: tribes in the periphery, castes in urban centers.
- 9 H. Tambs-Lyche then articulates various urban social configurations of caste clusters (Kanchipuram, Vijayanagar, Surat, Udupi, Ahmedabad, Bombay, Calcutta).
- 10 From these examples, the author draws more general conclusions (chapter 7), distinguishing three “overarching indigenous models” of the Estates (cf. above, on the case of Saurashtra), which form dynamic and interactive oppositions more than a static system of encompassing (Leach): the Brahmanic model; the king-centered model; the merchant model. He shows that the discourse of dominant groups, which asserts there is a harmonious vision of the social, finds its counterpart in the functionalist and Dumontian model, while the subordinate groups highlight conflicts and value equality (reformist movements), echoing the model of social stratification. The author’s argument is to show is that these points of view are irreconcilable, but offer a relatively stable arena of debate and positions. For this reason, Indian “middle-class elites” synthesize modern values, including class, without abolishing caste, or by articulating “‘Sanskritization’ and ‘Westernization’” (p. 286).
- 11 After having reinstated the castes in their socio-political reality, H. Tambs-Lyche finally deals with their connections to “Hinduism” (chapter 8). He draws on work demonstrating the contextual and fluid nature of divine classifications (Bouillier and Toffin, Babb, Wadley, Fuller), to underline the importance of transactions in the

processes of hierarchization of gods and men. Thus, rituals and festivals reflect less an underlying harmonious order than they express strategic attempts to create an “Integration through Ritual” (p. 303). In this perspective, the social and divine hierarchy needs to be reformulated into “hierarchizing discourses,” speaking a globally common language, but affirming competitions, as “a language of argument rather than a model of consensus” (p. 264). On this subject, the author points out that the logic of “hierarchizing discourse” produces what is often called Indian tolerance, which implies a diversity of points of view, but “that does not imply equality” of treatment (p. 316). Finally, taking up Leach vs Dumont, he concludes that the hierarchical discourse is certainly hegemonic in India, but that does not imply that the social structure reflects a single hierarchy. According to him, the same kind of discrepancy is also true in our understanding of social stratification in the West, a subject on which he is planning another book..

- 12 Harald Tambs-Lyche offers us here a sum of invaluable knowledge and overarching reflections, moving from the analysis of regional cases to an ambitious comparative sociology, a perspective which is rarely taken today. Historians may miss the omission of more recent references on certain subjects, and personally, I would engage more with Daud Ali’s insights on the formation of a court society in India and its discourses. I would also incorporate the issues of “individualism” and the “self” into a broader framework, but the author undoubtedly gives us key tools to push the discussion further. However, these few remarks are in no way meant to devalue this work, which draws on history and socio-ethnology in the service of a new synthesis of the socio-political dynamics of Indian society. The book will be a landmark if we give it the reception it deserves.

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