

## 4. INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT PURITY, POLLUTION, AND RITUAL

### HIERARCHY AND POWER

This chapter outlines, and also takes a critical look at, some views concerning the concepts of purity, pollution, hierarchy, power, and the caste system in Indian society. An important source for the traditional view is, apart from early Indian texts, Louis Dumont's book *Homo Hierarchicus*, mostly based on those texts.

According to a hymn (ṚS 10,90) in the Ṛgveda-Saṃhitā, the earliest Indian text, society is divided into four *varṇas*, literally 'colours', which came into being from the body parts of the sacrificed primeval man, Puruṣa. From his mouth came the Brahmins, from his arms the Rājanyas (Kṣatriyas), from his thighs issued the Vaiśyas, and from his feet the Śūdras. In classical Hinduism, each of the *varṇas* has a symbolic colour: white, red, green, and black.

Later, there developed a 'fifth *varṇa*' of the depressed classes or 'Untouchables' (*aspr̥śya*). These groups consist of subservient people who specialize in impure tasks. In other words, their traditional occupations make it necessary for them to touch defiling substances, such as dirty clothes, bodily parings, excreta, corpses etc. This attributes a permanent impurity to this category of people. (Douglas 1966: 127; Dumont 1972: 85-87; Fürer-Haimendorf 1950: v; Kolenda 1978: 32.)

Manu's Laws, commonly believed to be of divine origin by the Hindus, have probably existed in their present form in the 2nd century AD (Bühler 1886: xii, cxiv; Brockington 1981: 92). The distinction between law, social structure and religion is of a very recent date in India, and Manu's Laws can be studied as a religious as well as a civic guide to the people of the Post-Vedic period. (Cf., e.g., Baird 1971: 237ff.) According to Manu (1,88-91), Puruṣa assigned the following central occupations: teaching and studying the Veda together with sacrificing to the Brahmins; protecting people to the Kṣatriyas; tending cattle, cultivating land and trading to the Vaiśyas; and meekly serving the other three classes to the Śūdras.

Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador in India about 300 BC, is renowned for having written a description of the country and its people. They would have been divided into occupationally specialized groups within which they had to marry and stay. Also other early visitors have given similar accounts of India, and been struck by the rigour of these divisions and by the thorough way in which they were

applied to the different aspects of life. (Mandelbaum 1970: 3; for a critical survey of the studies on Megasthenes' description of Indian society, see Karttunen 1997: 82-87.)

The Sanskrit word *jāti* means 'birth, race, lineage, tribe, species, breed' to give only some of its meanings. The English word caste, coming from the Portuguese word *casta*, is often used as synonymous with Sanskrit *jāti*. Many scholars think that, while the *varṇa* ideal contributed to the idea of occupational specialization, the *jātis* developed when in-migrating groups, tribal groups, or groups with a newly developed craft were being integrated into a single social system. What Megasthenes describes have been interpreted as transitional social segments, part-*jāti*, part-*varṇa*, classes, which have the shape of the *varṇas*, but also some characteristics of the *jātis*. (Kolenda 1978: 33, 35.)

The words *jāti* and caste have sometimes been used as variants, sometimes to refer to different categories. A relatively widespread recommendation is to use the term *jāti* of a sub-caste. What can be counted as a caste or a sub-caste, and even a *varṇa*, is not always clear. Pauline Kolenda (1978: 10-11) gives the definition 'an endogamous large-scale descent-group' for the sub-caste/*jāti*, and 'a set of *jātis* sharing the same name, occupation, and ethnic history' for the caste. The Kerala Nāyars were known as soldiers earlier, and thus probably shared an occupation (that of the Kṣatriya *varṇa*, i.e. protecting the people), but nowadays they are a group of sub-castes with widely different occupations. Not everybody agrees which group is counted as Nāyar and which is not.

Apart from being a *varṇa*, the Brahmins are also counted as a caste. To a non-Brahmin the Brahmins are generally a caste, not a group of castes, and the further niceties of segmentation are not known to him. Division and subdivision are based upon many factors. For different purposes, such as marriage or politics, different levels of segmentation are relevant. The Brahmins have lately, and especially in political contexts, acquired a new consciousness of unity. For although in history the process of fission has been general, the opposite process of fusion seems to be gaining in importance. (Cf., e.g., Mandelbaum 1970: 22-23; Bêteille 1965: 75-79.)

Tribals were absorbed into the caste system, and as they did not avoid work in the fields and other 'filthy' jobs, they sank to the level of Untouchables. An example of the fluctuation and process of transition from tribe to untouchable caste is reflected in the way the Nāyāṭis are referred to in different studies. They were included in the tribes of Kerala by A. A. D. Luiz, but referred to as Untouchables by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf. Luiz also mentions that they are classified as scheduled tribes in the Census of India 1941, but that they are given the lowest rank in the Hindu hierarchy of castes. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1950: viii-ix; Luiz 1962: 209; Dumont 1972: 239; Kolenda 1978: 35-36.)



Fig. 8. Caster family at work. Children learn their traditional occupation from early childhood. Photo MP 1985.

An aspect of the caste system was the *jajmāni* system. The *jajmāni* relations were those in which *jātis* were expected to render a fixed type of service to other *jātis*. The relations entailed ritual matters and social support in addition to economic exchanges. The right to provide goods and services, including rituals to particular associates, was thus invested in the family. (Wiser 1958.) Along with *jajmāni* arrangements, commercial transactions have been part of the economy for many centuries. Contractual exchanges have become increasingly important and have nowadays mostly displaced the *jajmāni* arrangements. (Mandelbaum 1970: 161-163, 663.)

The caste system thus comprises specialization and interdependence of the groups. This specialization, while it entails separation between these groups, is oriented towards the needs of the whole. This fact links the division of labour with hierarchy. Although it is generally agreed that caste is characterized by endogamy, there are many exceptions to this. The system is more concerned with classifying human possibilities in a hierarchical order than excluding or punishing those who do not conform to its ideal. Talking about the marriage system, Dumont says that endogamy is a corollary of hierarchy and it is again necessary to regard as primary

the principle of hierarchy and not the principle of separation. (Dumont 1972: 81, 133, 151-167.)

The Untouchables have, after untouchability was formally abolished, nowadays achieved a partial social integration. According to law they have access to Hindu temples, and in many cases differ in that respect from non-Hindus. The non-Hindus can thus be counted as a sixth large social category, but they do not have a collective status. Indian Muslims and Christians seem to have something which corresponds to castes, or at least quasi-castes. (Dumont 1972: 83, 240, 253, 263; Damodaran 1995: 3-4.) According to C. J. Fuller (1996: 18-19), countless Muslim groups are functionally integrated into the caste system, but the Muslims themselves deny more and more emphatically that they have caste. If non-Hindus are counted as a sixth social category, considerations of purity and pollution should also be applied to them.

In the society of castes there exist institutions which seem to contradict it, namely renunciation and sects. According to Dumont, the renouncer lives not as a collective man but as an individual outside the strict interdependence between social groups. However, the renouncer does not really leave society, but lives from alms and preaches to the man in the world. The sects, again, including the Buddhists and Jains, are religious groupings constituted primarily of renouncers. The notion of impurity does not exist in these institutions, but one may wonder, says Dumont, whether this complementarity between caste and renunciation does not replace the complementarity of the pure and the impure. At least some sectarian groups, like the Lingayats, may or may not be classified as Hindus. (Dumont 1972: 83, 230-237.)

According to Dumont, an essential feature of the caste system is that status is not determined by political or economic superiority but by the system of religious ideas, and power should be inferior to status. He defines hierarchy as the principle by which the elements of the whole are ranked in relation to the whole. The opposition between pure and impure is the form of this hierarchy. (Dumont 1972: 74, 104-105, 114, 259-260.) The pure and the impure are relative categories so that what is pure for one group is polluting for another. The castes conceive relative status in terms of purity and impurity. The lowest castes are the most impure. In the absence during much of Indian history of a single integrated political unit or ecclesiastical organization, the universality of the purity-impurity principle has been a balancing factor. (Cf. Douglas 1966: 8-9; Kolenda 1978: 84.)

The concepts of *dharma* (the universal moral law which maintains the universe), *karma* (action), *punya* (spiritual merit), and *pāpa* (demerit) are contained in Hindu religious thought. Purity is the means to acquire merit, and pollution is the source of demerit. But pollution always overcomes purity. The rise in ritual status entails not doing certain things, but avoiding certain others. (Cf., e.g., Stevenson 1954: 49-50.) Physical purity is the prior condition for spiritual purity. External

ritual purity can be attained by means of earth and water, internal ritual purity by piety and purity of thought. (Lemerminier 1984: 153.) Physical pollution can also be external or internal. Internal physical pollution is more dangerous than external touch pollution, but mental and spiritual purity of mind and conscience is the end aim of ritual avoidances. (Stevenson 1954: 57.)

One of the greatest problems concerning caste hierarchy and status ranking is the fact that the hierarchy of relative purity is contradicted by the king, the eater of meat, being placed very high in it. The theory of the *varṇas*, while it subordinates the king to the priest, opposes these two jointly to the other social functions. The king, particularly as the supreme judge, is said to be the link between Brahmanic wisdom, the *dharma*, and the empirical world of men, so that the Brahmins, advisers to the king, could rule without directly having to govern the world. The Brahmin consecrates the king's power. (Dumont 1972: 114, 117-118, 300.)

Scholars before and after Dumont have been of the opinion that political and economic factors are more important than ideological ones. Dumont himself also has a reservation to make:

There is scarcely need to repeat that while the aspects called 'politico-economic' are thus considered secondary in relation to the ideology of caste, this is not the result of any prejudice but only of necessity of giving a faithful picture of the system as it appears to us. It is not impossible, although it is hardly conceivable at present, that in the future the politico-economic aspects will be shown to be in reality the fundamental ones, and the ideology secondary. Only we are not there yet. (Dumont 1972: 76.)

Dumont (1972: 117) also says that status ranking is not everything, and as hierarchy cannot give a place to power as such without contradicting its own principle it must give place to power without saying so. This sounds murky and vague. Franke and Chasin emphasize the basic meaning of the socio-economic factors as compared with the religio-ideological ones:

A major function of the caste system was to sort people into categories of wealth and status in a highly unequal way and then to provide social and religious justification for that inequality. (Franke & Chasin 1989: 71.)

In the holistic approach, caste relations are treated as just one aspect of life, other influential aspects being, e.g., family life, religion, kinship, economics, and politics within a social structure studied in a locality. Other principles besides purity and pollution are said to be operating in ranking castes. A king had to have high status, even if his life-style was impure, because otherwise his dignity and usefulness would be denied. The subordination of the servant to the served is said to be at the heart of the system. The giver of food is ranked higher than the receiver. The great skill of a craftsman, like a goldsmith, and the preciousness of the material that he works, are secular criteria for his relatively high rank. (Dumont 1972: 116-117; Kolenda 1978: 40, 79-82.) Village dominance results from the possession of land,

as politics encompasses economics. The land-owning dominant caste reproduces the royal function at the village level. Sometimes authority and hierarchy coalesce, as it did in Kerala when the Brahmins were big landowners. (Dumont 1972: 197, 207, 210; Douglas 1972: 15-16.)

As the creation story shows, right from the beginning the human body has been used as a symbol of the hierarchical society in India. The head has symbolized the highest *varna*, and the feet the lowest. Pollution is not only a matter between the castes. Concern with the impurities of human organic life has developed hand in hand with concern with the impurities of caste. Temporary and permanent impurity are identical in nature. (Dumont 1972: 85.)

Although respect is expected by men from their wives and children, the latter are not said to be polluting to the men. According to Dumont (1972: 88), it is said that a man's wife and child are pure from pollution for the person himself, but impure for others. In spite of Manu's statement that the mouth of a woman is always pure (Manu 5,86), a wife can eat from her husband's plate, but not vice versa. Thus the wife's saliva, after all, seems to be polluting to the husband. The same person can also be ritually clean or polluted at different times. An example is a menstruating woman. A dead body is very defiling, be it that of a human or an animal.

Mary Douglas has developed boundary-oriented theories which have been criticized, among others, by McKim Marriott as unsuitable for the study of Indian thought, where 'boundary overflows' are taken to be inevitable. (Marriott 1976: 110-111.) Though perhaps not ultimately revealing of the nature of Indian thought, Mary Douglas's analyses are not without practical value. She argues that when in a society rituals express anxiety about the body's orifices, the sociological counterpart of this anxiety is a care to protect the political and cultural unity of a minority group. Any sub-caste can be seen as such a minority group. The symbolism of margins and orifices works both ways: what comes out through them like blood, saliva, semen etc., and what goes in through the orifices, can be symbolically defiling. The boundary pollution among the highest castes focuses on sexuality and food, including the cooking. (Douglas 1966: 33, 121, 124ff.)

The law of contagion, a law of sympathetic magic, has been seen to work universally in human thought and practice. When two things have once been in contact with each other, they may influence or change each other for a period that extends beyond the termination of contact, perhaps even permanently. The transfer of properties seems to be accomplished through transfer of an 'essence'. (Rozin & Nemeroff 1990: 205-207.)

According to Marriott and Inden, Hindus believe that a person inherits a 'coded-substance'<sup>19</sup> made up of 'coded-particles', which may be shared or ex-

<sup>19</sup> Marriott and Inden maintain that Hindus do not think dualistically, separating body and spirit, or body and mind, but monistically, believing that 'a person inherits a *unitary coded-*

changed with others. Correspondingly, single actors are not thought to be 'individual' but 'dividual' or 'divisible', as they absorb heterogeneous material influences and give out particles of 'coded-substances'. One should try to gain suitable or better 'coded-particles' than one's own. The particles can be loosened to separate and combine with other kinds of 'coded-substance'. In these internal processes and external exchanges heat is catalytic. Processes like digestion and sexual intercourse require heat to separate, to distill, and to mix different substances. That is why one should be careful with, e.g., cooked food. (Marriott 1976: 109-112; Marriott & Inden 1977: 232-233; Kolenda 1978: 68-70.)

According to Leach (1976: 49), the indices in non-verbal communication systems do not have meaning as isolates but as members of sets, and a sign or symbol only acquires meaning when it is discriminated from some contrary sign or symbol. Likewise a caste can only be recognized in contrast to other castes (Leach 1960: 5). But the place of an index can change in a set. It is often impossible to construct a hierarchy which is agreed upon by all concerned. However, the Brahmins are always ranked highest and the Untouchables lowest.

It is as a rule not possible to change one's caste,<sup>20</sup> but a caste may get a higher or lower position in different localities and times. A family or a group of families within a *jāti* may in some cases have claimed a separate identity and higher rank than the *jāti* of origin, and formed a new *jāti*. Before British rule, conquest or occupancy of a territory was an effective way of rising in the caste system, as was the serving of rulers. When the Census-takers recorded caste membership, claims to high *varṇa* status were made. Sanskritization, the effort made by lower castes to emulate the Brahmin or the dominant cultivator caste style of life, is likely to be effective only if reinforced by economic or political power. A group may have moved from Sanskritization to politicization with an attack on the caste system in a new democratic order. Downward mobility is also possible in the caste system. (Kolenda 1978: 95-106.)

Applying the reference group theory, K. C. Alexander (1968) has shown that even people from an extremely low stratum in an extremely rigid social system, like that of Kerala, may achieve higher status by assimilating the values of the higher castes and modifying their behaviour accordingly. The Pulayas of Kerala have been able to lessen the repulsion of the higher strata towards them in many spheres of

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*substance*. The code "programmed" into the person's substance or body relates to his or her varṇa, jāti, sex and personality' (Kolenda 1978: 68).

<sup>20</sup> According to Dumont (1972: 214), the king could sometimes promote a caste, or move someone from one caste to another. There are recent examples of lower castes turning Nampūtiris by paying some money and undergoing a few rituals in Kerala. These conversions are said to be sanctioned by the Paliyam Declaration that followed a 1987 convention at Paliyam (M. G. Radhakrishnan 1999: 26-27).

life, but the most important sphere in which they still encounter discrimination is in marriage.

A caste is a multiplex micro-community fulfilling many functions. It is a kinship group, a political constituency, a work group, a trade union, and a religious congregation. There are three social types, the tribe, the caste, and the kin-community, which can all be seen as transformations of a single underlying descent-group structure. Tribes were before the castes and co-exist with them today. It is possible that the tribe then became a caste as Hindu village life was established. When modernization undermined the traditional caste system, kin-communities emerged. In rural areas, most people still participate in some way in a traditional caste system. An emphasis on unilineal descent principle facilitates the organization of corporate groups which endure beyond the life of an individual or family. A number of distinguished scholars suggest that the most persistent feature of Indian society is its organization into these micro-communities. (Kolenda 1978: 6-11.)

Traditional studies of the Indian caste system have been criticized as being limited and presenting but half the truth. According to E. Valentine Daniel, the principles, like purity versus pollution, have been chosen from within an artificially enclosed analytic system, that of caste. The inability to go beyond caste arose from the very failure to see that *jāti* is not applied to human beings alone, but to animals, plants, and even inorganic material. (Daniel 1984: 1-2.)

There is no better term than *substance* to describe the general nature of these variously ranked cultural units. In other words, differentially valued and ranked substances underlie the system known as the caste system, which is but one of many surface manifestations of this system of ranked substances. (Daniel 1984: 2.)

The cow is an animal, and should be lower than man. At the same time, the cow is considered to be holier than man, even a god, and consequently, even the most impure product of this animal, cowdung, is used to purify, e.g., homes and even objects which are in contact with food-stuffs. For a god cowdung would be polluting. The complexity of Indian thought is expressed by Wendy O'Flaherty in the following way:

...each myth celebrates the belief that the universe is boundlessly various, that everything occurs simultaneously, that all possibilities may exist without excluding each other. (O'Flaherty 1975: 11.)

Margaret Trawick (1990: 42) talks about intentional ambiguity at the heart of things.

The belief that even gods can lose their purity by contact with defiled religious agents, and that pollution roused the vengeance of gods towards the whole society, explain why all social groups had an interest in safeguarding Brahmin purity through conforming themselves to the hierarchical social system (Lemerclinier 1984:



155-157). So the whole universe has been thought to be dichotomized into the categories of pure and impure.

In his article on Hindu transactions, Marriott's title includes the key words 'diversity without dualism'. In his transactional model, in which giving and receiving yield four codes or tactics – two asymmetrical ones (optimal and pessimal) and two symmetrical ones (maximal and minimal) – he attempts to follow Hindu cognitions of monism, particularism, and dividualism. He concludes that transactors and transactions are oriented neither toward purity nor toward power, but toward a unitary concept of superior value, power understood as vital energy, 'substance-code' of subtle, homogeneous quality, and high, consistent transactional status or rank. I have used one of Marriott's transactional models (Marriott 1976: 121ff.) for analyzing some features in the Nampūtiri-dominated traditional society.

Dumont criticizes H. N. C. Stevenson's one-sided attributional theory of caste ranking, and Marriott's one-sided stress on interaction. According to Dumont, both are present, as interaction cannot replace the overall ideological orientation. (Dumont 1972: 130-132.)

Many of Dumont's critical reviewers have attacked both his theoretical and his ethnographic representation of the caste system (cf. Fuller 1996: 4). For instance, Owen M. Lynch (1977: 262) concludes that Dumont has offered us neither a productive paradigm for sociological research nor a particularly enlightening interpretation of India. While Marriott praises Dumont for recognizing that Indian thought joins certain ideas that are regarded as ultimately dual in the West, he regrets Dumont's practice of postulating dichotomies, like asceticism opposed to worldly social structure and the ritual status of purity of castes opposed to secular power and wealth. According to Marriott, the gods, the Brahmin *varṇa*, and the king, i.e. divinity, morality, and royal power, are all seen as transformations of each other and of the originally undifferentiated cosmic energy or protoplasm. Power would be synonymous with both religious virtue and effective worldly dominance. (Marriott 1976: 112-113)

There has been criticism among some modern anthropologists of scholars who mistook the learned Brahmanic perspective (i.e. a partial, idealistic view) for a realistic, sociological consensus covering all groups within that society (cf., e.g., Pinney 1990b: 288). While most parts of the subcontinent were aware of the Brahmanical interpretation of the universe and responded to it in their life, there were ideologies which worked against hierarchy and rigid caste boundaries (Bayly 1988: 156; Fuller 1996: 5-6).

Some critical anthropologists do not deny the importance of ideological and ritual matters in society, but find other matters more important in structuring inter-caste and kinship relations within a village than the hierarchical position of a caste. Let us take as an example Gloria Goodwin Raheja. In a certain North Indian village,

according to her, the centrality of the dominant landholders does not lie mainly in their 'temporal power' or their hierarchical position, but in their role as sacrificers (*yajamāna*) and givers of prestations (*dāna*) in the proper ritual contexts to appropriate recipients. It is these prestations that transfer well-being and protection to the village. Both Raheja, and A. M. Hocart (1970: 44) before her, have emphasized an ordering of castes in which the ritual services performed by the Brahmins, washermen, drummers and other low castes are religiously equivalent in relation to the king, and at the village level, to the cultivator. (Raheja 1988: xi-xii, 14, 24ff., 248-249.)

Raheja points out that great importance is given to *dāna* in Hindu textual traditions. E.g., Manu's Laws (1,86) state that *dāna* is the chief duty in the present world age.

Immediately following this verse in Manu, a description of the 'duties' of the four *varṇas* is given, in which the giving and receiving of *dān* are crucial in what Manu calls the 'protection of the universe' (*sarvasyāśya tu sargasya guptyārth* [sic] and in the differentiation of the *varṇas* themselves (Manu 1,86-91) (Raheja 1988: xi-xii).

I must make an effort to emphasize the special position of the Brahmins. The four different world ages have a hierarchy, and the one in which history is played now is the fourth and the lowest of them. In the first age the chief duty is the performance of austerities, in the second it is knowledge, and in the third, Vedic sacrifice (*yajña*). In our age the chief duty is the *dāna* (Manu 1,85-86). The chief duties of the two earlier ages, knowledge through the study of the Veda, and offering Vedic sacrifices, in addition to *dāna*, are mentioned as duties of all three highest *varṇas*. Activities allotted to the Brahmins alone are teaching of the sacred knowledge, accepting *dāna*, and the priestly office (*yajana*) in Vedic sacrifices (Manu 1,88). Again, in another chapter, Manu (7,85-86) refers to gifts to those who are not Brahmins, but restricts the highest reward to the donor only if the receiver is a Brahmin who knows the Veda, i.e. there was a hierarchy in rewards for giving *dāna* as well.

Using Manu to support the view that the giving of *dāna* has more social and ritual significance than hierarchy, purity and pollution and the supremacy of the Brahmins, is, in my opinion, not entirely justified. (For a thorough discussion of *dāna*, see Kane 1941: 110ff., 837-888.) Immediately after the reference given by Raheja, Manu goes on to emphasize that, since the Brahmins sprang from Brahmā's mouth, his purest part, the Brahmins are the purest of men, the lords of the whole creation, and the most excellent of men, and not the Kṣatriyas, notwithstanding the fact that the Kṣatriyas, too, in addition to the Brahmins and Vaiśyas, are supposed to bestow gifts (*dāna*) and to offer sacrifices. On account of the excellence of his origin, the Brahmin is also entitled to whatever exists in the world, and other mortals subsist through the benevolence of the Brahmin. (Manu 1,92-103.)

For the Self-existent (Svayambhū) [Brahmā], having performed austerities, produced him [the Brahmin] first from his own mouth, in order that the [Vedic] offerings might be conveyed to the gods and manes and that this universe might be preserved (Manu 1,94, transl. Bühler 1886: 25).

I am convinced that Raheja's observations are accurate and her conclusions correct about the centrality and meaning of *dāna* and the landholders in the North Indian village where she was doing her field work in the 1970s. But one must presumably be prepared to find geographical differences in the course of history. Raheja (1988: 242), like many scholars before her, admits that the elaboration of caste ranking in the Upper Ganges region is relatively slight compared with other areas of India, particularly the southern areas of Kerala and the Coromandel plains. For instance Mencher's (1966a: 153) observation that in south India the concept of pollution is more deeply ingrained than that of occupation makes one think that considerations about pollution, hierarchy, and the Brahmin view should not be overlooked there.

Dumont's focus on continuities with the past and his picture of Indian society as fundamentally unchanged since ancient times has come under heavy criticism. Historical research claims to reveal that the caste system in 'traditional' villages was the product of history and particularly colonial history. Here again the extreme views of timeless India on the one hand, and of India as a caste society which was created by colonialism on the other, can probably be considered erroneous. The colonial period is believed to have speeded the advance of principles of purity and pollution in the countryside. (Bayly 1988: 155-157; Fuller 1996: 4-6.)

In modern change of caste, according to Dumont, structure seems to yield to substance, as each caste becomes an individual competing with other castes. According to the same author, however, this only bears on the politico-economic domain of social life, and does not transform the whole system, despite the weakening of the opposition between pure and impure. (Dumont 1972: 275-276.) This claim, like Dumont's structural model, has not been found convincing by some scholars studying caste today. Still, many scholars have found that change is consistent with Dumont's substantialization thesis, each caste becoming like a collective individual with its own distinctive culture and way of life. If substantialization is seen as a form of ethnicization, the transformation from ethnicity to caste described by Weber is now proceeding in reverse. Is there any caste left? In public behaviour and official statements there is delegitimation of caste inequality, but in private evaluations are still made. (Fuller 1996: 12-13, 21-22.)

Indeed, caste status is not always and everywhere understood in terms of relative ritual purity. As some scholars have observed, a caste's inferiority may have more to do with servitude than pollution. A different way of life as a marker of separation, instead of purity and pollution, is said to have become proportionally

more important during the last few decades. Modern urban India, still a status-conscious world, may have, for instance, education, occupation and income as a basis of status. (Fuller 1996: 12-14, 16.)

I have come across an argument that the caste system and the *jajmāni* system never existed and functioned in south India. This to me is amazing, but it evidently has to do with the recent and politically coloured debate about what caste was and what it is, and the rapid developments in contemporary Indian society.

An active public debate has been going on since the mid-1980s caused by the caste reservation policy, religious militancy and the ensuing political crises. The contemporary nature of caste itself is being changed by this debate. There is a tendency in research to concentrate on the modern situation and diversity in India and neglect early Indian texts, pan-Indian structures and holism once more. Presentism, however, as Fuller has pointed out, should not lead us to neglect contemporary India's relation with its past. (See Fuller 1996: 1-5.)

## WHAT IS RITUAL?

As I study a group of people who are renowned for having preserved very ancient rituals to our day and whose daily lives were said to be filled with rituals, I have been advised to include a short discussion on the nature and meaning of ritual in general.

There has been a revival of ritual, religion and tradition all over the world, a revival considered to be a response to globalization (see, e.g., Tønnesson 1994: 15). To quote Ronald L. Grimes (1996: xiii), beginning in the mid-1960s, ritual was launched into prominence as a celebrated cause. An interdisciplinary discussion of ritual emerged in the mid-1970s.

Although it is not easy to say what ritual is, many scholars have enumerated features which characterize it or the ritual aspect of behaviour. Don Handelman (1990: 10-14), bringing his discussion back to theories of ritual and ceremony, enumerates five features as characteristic of a public event: formality, replicability, intentionality (direction, causality), symbolic formation, and a connectivity that extends beyond itself (consequentiality to social life in some way).

Not all rituals need to have an audience or a number of performers. On the contrary, rituals may have only a single solitary performer. The public aspect of rituals comes from the fact that they are recognized and transmitted by a community, and that they tell about society. Only certain kinds of persons are also supposed to perform certain kinds of rituals in a society. (G. Lewis 1980: 11-12, 21-22.)

Even animals are considered to have rituals (Grimes 1996: xiii; Lawick-Goodall 1996: ix-x). What animal and human rituals share is that they serve to express the status of an individual for the time being. Some human rituals would

contain additional messages transmitted by the participants but not encoded by them. (Rappaport 1996: 429).

According to one view, ritual is the non-instrumental aspect or component of events that may also include an instrumental component. According to another view, ritual not only communicates but also does something as well. But what is done is not done in accordance with the laws of physics, chemistry, or biology. The efficacy of ritual derives from the 'occult'. (Rappaport 1996: 429.)

According to Gilbert Lewis, there is easy general agreement about the central area of ritual. He goes on to discuss the periphery and boundaries that are in dispute. Ritual may aim at clear explicit symbolism or aim at mystery. Ritual is the executive arm of a religious or magical system. Guidance on what to do is explicit, but the reason for doing it may not be. Although the recognition of communication and coded message in ritual provides an insight into it, there is also an ambiguity of the active and passive for creator, performer, and beholder. The complexity and uncertainty as to the meaning of ritual may be a source of its strength. (G. Lewis 1980: 1-38.)

Ritual has been detached from the sacred and allowed the possibility of being creative. Instead of being the guardian of the status quo, ritual is seen as capable of being subversive and challenging the status quo. (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993: xvi; Grimes 1996: xiii-xiv.) If anybody has had and still has such tradition-preserving action which every scholar can call ritual it is undoubtedly the Nampūtiris. One might try to see whether their is also such creative, even subversive, sacred or non-sacred action in the sphere of life of the Nampūtiris which is comparable to ritual or could be characterized as ritual.