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Q3(a)

Contextualize Louis Dumont's concept of 'binary opposition' with reference to caste system in India

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Sociology GS 2 · 20 marks · Caste System

Caste System: Perspectives (G.S. Ghurye, M.N. Srinivas, Louis Dumont, Andre Beteille); Features of caste system; Untouchability - forms and perspectives.

Core demand of the question

- Contextualize Louis Dumont's concept of binary opposition with reference to the caste system in India
- Explain pure/impure and related pairs
- Add Indian critiques from Srinivas, **Marriott**, **Beteille**, and Desai

Revision summary

Dumont's master binary is pure versus impure, with status encompassing power.

Caste is treated as a hierarchical whole, not a failed class system.

Marriott tests the binary in food and service interaction.

Srinivas, **Beteille** and Desai show land, office and class leaking through the model.

The binary remains useful for ritual rank, not as a total theory.

Introduction

Louis Dumont used binary opposition to argue that caste is a whole organised by the contrast of pure and impure. Status, not power, is the encompassing pole. The Indian debate is whether that binary explains lived caste or only a Brahmanical idea of caste.

Body

The binary in Dumont

- **Pure and impure is the master opposition:** occupations, foods, bodies, and castes are ranked by pollution and its removal.
- Priest and king, status and power, hierarchy and equality, **homo hierarchicus** and homo aequalis are paired so that Indian caste is not a failed class system but a different ideology.
- The Brahmana encompasses the Kshatriya because ritual status encompasses political power in the ideology, even when kings rule in fact.
- Untouchability is not a side cruelty; it is the logical extreme of the same binary.

Village and interactional context

- **McKim Marriott's transactions of food and service give the binary an interactional test:** who accepts whose cooked food.
- 1950s village studies supplied Dumont with a field for hierarchy, yet **Marriott** also showed that rank is negotiated, not only deduced from texts.

- Srinivas's dominant caste places land and numbers against priestly purity, so the status-power binary leaks in the village.

Critiques that re-context the binary

- Andre Beteille argued that land, office, and caste do not coincide as Dumont's whole would like, and that equality is now an Indian value, not only a Western import.
- A. R. Desai treats purity talk as ideology over class; the binary may hide rent and labour.
- Dalit movements and Ambedkarite politics refuse the binary as fate and turn it into a public wrong.
- Yogendra Singh and the Rudolphs show caste operating as association and vote bank, which is not Dumont's encompassing ritual whole.

What still holds

- Everyday refusals of touch, marriage, and temple entry still follow a purity grammar in many regions.
- The binary is a powerful model of ideology. It is not a complete sociology of power, gender, or the state.

Flow diagram

Pure versus impure -> Hierarchy of caste
Pure versus impure -> Status encompasses power
Dominant caste class vote -> Leak in the binary
Hierarchy of caste -> Leak in the binary

Conclusion

Dumont's binary opposition contextualises caste as a ranked ideology of pure and impure, status over power. Indian sociology keeps the insight for ritual rank and rejects it as a total explanation of village class, dominant caste, and democratic politics.

Facts & figures

Homo Hierarchicus

Dumont's 1966 account of caste as ideology organised by purity and pollution.

Homo hierarchicus / aequalis

Contrast of hierarchical man with the equal individual of modern ideology.

Marriott

Interactional transactions as the empirical face of rank.

Srinivas dominant caste

Local power can outrank priestly purity in village politics.

Beteille

Caste, class and power are related but distinct; equality is also an Indian value.

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