

Introduction

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For many years, French scholars of India have paid as little attention to the Indian “Untouchables” as their foreign colleagues, or, for that matter, many Indian sociologists. The development of a European learned tradition of textual studies, from the end of the 18th century, gave birth to classical Indianism as a branch of Orientalism, and privileged for more than 150 years the extremely vast realm of religious texts and treatises, mostly governed by Brahminical paradigms. A different legacy of the 17th and 18th century was henceforth forgotten, or pushed to the sidelines. For some of the first observers of India, such as Abbé Dubois¹ and his rarely acknowledged predecessor, Father Coeurdoux, to whom he owed much, wrote on “Untouchables,” as they were eager to understand Indian society in its entirety. At that time, Christian missionaries, eager to convert the “gentiles,” had to decide if they would focus their attention on the upper castes, as Roberto de Nobili decided to do, or on the masses as most of missionaries did later on.

The British administrators of Indian territories that came under their control from the mid-18th century had to define a strategy of governance balancing adjustment and reform. The size of the land under their control and the complexity of the society they ruled were bound to favor a dialogue — not necessarily an understanding — between the British political power in India, British thinkers (some of them administrators as well) who wrote on India, the new brand of learned British Indianists, and the Indian intelligentsia who tried, all through the 19th century, to reassess their civilizational legacy in relation to the theories of the Enlightenment and the principles of British law.

The interaction between India and the French followed more or less the same pattern, but the French power in India was limited to small demilitarized settlements on the Bay of Bengal and the Malabar coast. The largest colony, Pondicherry, was in an area where the “Untouchable” Paraiyar caste was very prominent, but officials did not come to terms with the problem of Untouchability, for during the last decades of the French regime all Indian subjects — “Untouchables” included — were French citizens theoretically enjoying the same civil rights. The French Army offered

many Paraiyar families, after a free education at the local French College, a job overseas and an established pattern of social mobility that did not disappear on their return home. The harsh reality of Untouchability in the villages was much less talked about than the troubles raised by a few high caste Christian families when a French bishop in Pondicherry called for the pulling down of the wooden railings that had long separated the “Untouchable” devotees from the rest in some Catholic churches.

Be that as it may, the importance of French research on India was greater than the extent of their political power in India. The horizon of French Indianists was freed from any political or administrative purpose. Their field of studies was “naturally” focused on the textual traditions, with however a specificity inherited from the historical French settlements in South India: in the field of French Indology, Sanskrit studies, important as they are, have not developed at the cost of Tamil studies.

Then came Louis Dumont, one of the founding members and the first director of the Center for the Study of India and South Asia, at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. Though he did not spend much time in India, he did give social anthropology and field studies a special place amongst French Indianists, adding a new dimension to the long-established tradition of textual studies whose strongholds have been since the 19th century — and remain to a large extent — the College de France in Paris and a few chairs for Indian Studies at the University of Paris, and the Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO), founded in the early 1900s. The EFEO’s Indian branch opened in the 1950s in Pondicherry, joining hands with the new French Institute (known as the French Institute of Indology), but at that time without any focus on sociology or anthropology.

With his first major work on India, *Une sous-caste de l’Inde du sud* (1957), Dumont offered a very precise account of the social organization and religion of a Tamil sub-caste of low status but locally dominant, the Pramalai Kallar, who are classified today in the administrative and sociological jargon as one of the “Other Backward Classes.”² The rela-

tionships between the Kallars and the Sakkiliyars — the local “Untouchable” caste in the sample village chosen by Dumont — are mentioned briefly. Dumont notes a key point previously discussed in Dubois’ classic: however despised they are, “Untouchables” are indispensable on two accounts: as agricultural laborers, since the Kallars refrain from tilling the land themselves, and as ritual agents in a number of ceremonial functions, some of them impure because linked to death. Nevertheless, the divide between “Untouchables” and low castes was strong, and today in southern Tamilnadu acute tensions continue between the low but powerful caste of Thevars and the most numerous “Untouchable” caste of Pallars.

In 1966 Dumont published his masterpiece and best known book, *Homo hierarchicus. Essai sur le système des castes*,³ which had a profound impact on Indian studies, in France and elsewhere. Attacked later on by those who insisted that the core of the social relations is to be found in power, not status, Dumont was criticized for looking at Indian society through the Brahminical paradigm. Dumont’s structural analysis of the rationale of caste hierarchy based on a scale of presumed purity, however, remains a major contribution. It did position “Untouchables” as one of the two nodes — with the Brahmins — structuring the social spectrum. The problem, perhaps, was that this place, the lowest (and duly accepted as such by those at the bottom) was precisely the one ascribed to them by the dominant ideology defining subservience and respect as the essential duty of “Untouchables.” An American scholar, Michael Moffatt, relied largely on Dumont’s theory for an in-depth study of an “Untouchable” Tamil community, the Paraiyars, which highlighted “the fundamental cultural consensus from the top to the bottom of a local caste hierarchy.”⁴ By 1979, however, when the study was published, a number of scholars, some of them Marxist, had reinterpreted the social and cultural setting of “Untouchables,” in Tamilnadu and elsewhere, by emphasizing the difference of ethos between “Untouchables” and non-Untouchables, and questioning very much the existence of a consensus. Moffatt argued that Gough and Mencher (to mention just two anthropologists who had worked in Tamilnadu)⁵ had overstated the contrasts between the “Untouchables” and the non-Untouchables.

The significance of protest movements amongst “Untouchables” — one of the best known being the conversion to Buddhism of followers of B.R. Ambedkar in Maharashtra — was not much discussed then, though a revival of the protest movement resulted in 1972 in the birth of a radical intellectual group, the Dalit Panthers. The word “Dalit,” which means “crushed” and by extension “the oppressed” in Marathi, was for almost two decades applied to militants of the cause of emancipation and a literature of protest and denunciation of the fate of the “Untouchables.” In the 1990s however, the word gained wide recognition, and replaced “Harijans” (Gandhi’s denomination of “Untouchables” as sons of God), as a generic identifier for “Untouchables” or “Ex-Untouchables” as they are sometimes referred

to, for Untouchability has been proclaimed illegal by the Indian Constitution of 1950. In this generalized use, “Dalit” no longer refers to militants or even the consciousness of the oppressed regarding their oppression: the word encompasses all those still defined in the administrative jargon as “Scheduled castes,” after the schedules used to identify groups entitled to benefit from specific government policies.

The question today is no longer for scholars to define themselves as Dumontian or non-, anti-, or post-Dumontian. The legacy of the French scholar and the arguments of his critics have been available to everyone for years. More importantly, the struggle for emancipation of Dalits has gained a tremendous momentum over the last decade or so, and this helps in reassessing the established knowledge on two accounts; the first, related to the present dynamics of social transformation, the second related to the need for looking afresh at past movements of protest. The recent “rediscovery” of Ambedkar — the leading figure of Indian Dalits, and one of the key redactors of the Indian Constitution — who died in 1956, brings along with it the rediscovery of lesser known movements in various parts of India which have often been neglected by the established mainstream. Many questions, therefore, confront us today, and this special issue addresses some of them, drawing on the research of a few French and French-speaking Belgian scholars on Untouchability and Dalits.

The first question relates to the structural position of “Untouchables” in the Indian caste system and the resilience of the consensus through time and space. Was the dominant Brahminical paradigm strong enough to sustain a fundamental consensus encompassing even the most oppressed? The question may be invalidated by the rise of a multiplicity of Dalit movements (intellectual, social, political), but in fact is still relevant on many accounts. Perceptions, mindsets, the level of involvement in social movements are not similar all over India, and not similar even inside identified social groups (including families). If we hear only those who articulate their anger, protest or expectations, what about those who remain silent? What lies behind this silence? Racine and Racine, in their contribution below, analyze the significance and the ambiguity of the consensus as illustrated by the life-story of Viramma,⁶ a Tamil Dalit agricultural laborer who totally interiorizes the rationale of oppression offered by the dominant ideology, but nevertheless preserves a culture which is not simply the reflection of the high castes “Great tradition,” and welcomes reforms if offered “by those who stand above,” in other words, by the dominating classes. On the other hand, protest movements or even the quiet rejection of the rationale of domination seem too risky to her.

That social and cultural relations between Dalits and other segments of Indian society are much more complex than standard categorizations may suggest is also illustrated by the two following papers. Dominique-Sila Khan draws here from her recent book on one of the most popular saints in Gujarat and Rajasthan, Baba Ramdev, believed to

be a 15th-century incarnation of Vishnu.⁷ Not only is the cult of Ramdev appropriated by both the Dalit Meghval caste and high caste Rajputs, but it also has connections with the Muslim Ismaili tradition. That God could be an Untouchable — or could incarnate himself as such — is a question which, as Khan shows, is not just a theological one. Its implications are socio-economic as well, and result in caste conflicts, the intellectual invention of tradition, and economic competition. Robert Deliège, on the other hand, draws from his recently translated book and highlights how the conversion of Dalits to Christianity may be superficial.⁸ In the Tamil locality he analyzed, the caste sense of belonging is such that more ties unite Paraiyar caste converts to Hindu Paraiyars than to high caste Catholics — including a number of priests — who still maintain a strong sense of exclusiveness. Interestingly, and contradicting what is generally believed, Deliège finds that the converts have not benefited economically or socially from their new affiliation.

A second question addresses the changes affecting the caste system and caste as a category. An extensive literature has recently emerged on the transformation of the Indian society as a whole, on the evolution of caste (or even more explicitly on the disappearance of the caste system as it was theorized decades ago), and on the new relationship established between the State, politics and social change.⁹ The Dalits have not been the first to struggle for emancipation. The struggles of the high non-Brahmin castes starting a century ago, and the so-called “Other Backward Classes” in the last 20 years or so have led the way. But the special status of Dalits, who are both the most economically and ideologically oppressed category, gives their present struggle a special significance; as one of the two poles — along with Brahmins — of the traditional hierarchy, their rejection of the system would ensure its total collapse, first at the level of the vital ideological consensus, and then, sooner or later, in the daily social relations. Whatever the resilience of the economic tools of domination this process is clearly already underway.

A third question emerges from the previous ones: what could be the paths of emancipation? Racine and Racine discuss the challenges Dalit leaders have to face. If the more radical Dalit intellectuals believe that Dalits have to invent a new culture, not subservient to the dominant model inherited from the past, most Dalits also consider other paths of emancipation. For many, emancipation would ideally amount to integration into the mainstream society, a slow process already underway through the policy of positive discrimination. For others, social struggle at the grassroots level is the key to change, above all, the mindset of the oppressed. Those engaged in political struggle emphasize the need to build specific tools outside the old frame of overarching parties such as the Congress. Power is now the goal, for it is believed that only access to power can make the collapse of the old order possible. But the question remains: how can one-fifth to one-fourth of the Indian population — the most deprived — make themselves heard? By forging their own political parties such as the ineffective

Republican Party inherited from Ambedkar or by admitting that alliances are necessary not just at the time of elections or when government coalitions are organized, but as a permanent tool of political agitation unifying Dalits and other dominated groups (Muslims, Backward castes) against the traditionally dominant groups? Christophe Jaffrelot, who touches on this point when discussing the “politicization of caste against conservative democracy” in his recent book on democracy in India,¹⁰ analyzes below the rationale of the most significant political effort in this regard: the Bahujan Samaj Party, with its core of Dalit militants and its Dalit leadership, is playing the larger field in their quest for power, particularly in the most populous Indian state, Uttar Pradesh.

The following essays address many additional questions, and leave aside many others, that I shall not list here. Let me simply emphasize, in concluding this short introduction, what is at stake in the present Dalit dynamics for India today. The fate of those most oppressed by the long history of ideological and material domination, is obviously the first issue. But this slow emancipation will not succeed without the joint transformation of Dalit consciousness on one side and the mindset of the mainstream society on the other. The very structure of an old civilization is under stress now, and this challenge is perfectly consistent with the goal the young Indian nation set itself 50 years ago when becoming independent: social justice and genuine democracy. What is happening before our eyes is therefore not just significant for the 150 millions of Indian Dalits nor for India alone. The relation between development and society, state and polity, culture and globalization, human rights and democracy are also at stake in this extraordinary social laboratory that contemporary India has become. In other words, the emergence of new social movements from the lowest stratum of a major society, as well as their contradictions, setbacks and hesitations, define a field which deserves the attention of all those engaged in the study of social theory, social change and democracy. India is not entering the global world only through its software industry, its stock exchanges, and its nuclear ambition. It must also figure prominently in attempts at a critical understanding of the dynamics of social transformation as a major subject of inquiry, preserving a sensitivity to its cultural legacy but free from the illusory prison of insurmountable specificity.

Notes

¹ Abbé Dubois, *Moeurs, institutions et cérémonies des peuples de l'Inde*. Paris, 1825. Dubois was a missionary from the French Missions Etrangères, and arrived in Pondicherry in 1792. The English translation of his work, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, remains on the catalogue Oxford University Press, New Delhi, after innumerable editions.

² Louis Dumont, *Une sous-caste de l'Inde du sud. Organisation sociale et religion des Pramalai Kallar*. Paris and La Haye: Mouton, 1957. English Translation: *A South Indian Subcaste. Social Organization and Religion of the Pramalai Kallar*, New Delhi, New York:

Oxford University Press, 1986.

³ Louis Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus. Essai sur le système des castes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966. English translation: *Homo hierarchicus: the Caste System and its Implications*, London: Paladin, 1972.

⁴ Michael Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

⁵ Kathleen Gough's and Joan P. Mencher's writings are identified in the following paper by Racine and Racine.

⁶ Viramma, Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine, *Viramma. Life of an Untouchable*, (London-New York: Verso, 1997). (First French edition, 1995).

⁷ Dominique-Sila Khan, *Conversions and Shifting Identities. Ramdev Pir and the Ismailis in Rajasthan*, Delhi: Manohar, 1996.

⁸ Robert Deliège, *The World of the Untouchables: the Paraiyars of South India*, New Delhi: The Oxford University Press, 1997 (First German edition in French: 1988).

⁹ To quote just a few: C.J. Fuller (ed.), *Caste Today*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996; M.N. Srinivas (ed.), *Caste. Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1996); A. Béteille, *Society and Politics in India*, (New Delhi: The Oxford University Press 1992); N. Chandhoke, *State and Civil Society*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995); K.L. Sharma, *Social Stratification in India. Issues and Themes*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997). See also Rajni Kothari, "Rise of the Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste," in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *State and Politics in India*, (New Delhi: The Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 439-458. Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992). The second revised edition 1996, offers as the sub-title, *Essays on the Ambedkar Movement in an Historical Perspective*. Today, the multiplicity, and the eventual contradictions, of the various Dalit movements is such that no book can reasonably offer a comprehensive analysis of what is certainly one of the most significant and most complex developments transforming India society.

¹⁰ Christophe Jaffrelot, *La démocratie en Inde. Religion, caste et politique*, Paris: Fayard, 1998.
