

Hierarchy, Equality, and Liberation

Some Reflections on Indian Culture

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What are the prospects of liberation for the poor in our country? By 'liberation' I do not mean the release of an individual from the cycle of *karma* and *samsara*, of birth and rebirth, but rather freedom from injustice and oppression, poverty and inequality, so that every Indian can live with others with a sense of dignity and self-worth. It is the sort of freedom which Tagore dreamed about in his immortal poem, "Into that heaven of freedom..." and that which is envisaged for our society in the Constitution of India.

When liberation is so understood, Indian society and culture offers us with seemingly insolvable puzzles. We have ethical theories and philosophies that are incomparable. Who cannot but be impressed by the comprehensive and holistic outlook offered by the theory of *varnashrama-dharma* and *yama-niyamas*, which not only provides an ethics for all (*samanyadharmas*) but also for the different groups in society and even for the different stages in a person's life? Even more, unlike most Western ethical theories which restrict themselves to the human realm, our ethics seem to make room for the whole of creation. It seems really impressive. And yet we still have bonded labourers. On the one hand *dharma* is said to be deeply social.¹ Even the very word

dharma as 'that which holds together' seems to have a social implication. *Advaitic* philosophy as interpreted by Aurobindo and Vivekanada also has tremendous social implications. "I should love my neighbour not because he is in the neighbourhood... but because he is myself."² On the other hand, if "my God is the poor", as Vivekanada teaches, then, why such disparity in Indian society? Even a lay person's observation would suffice to show that we are far from achieving the goal of liberation of the poor. That it is not because of a lack of material resources (at least not primarily) is clear: there has been a phenomenal growth in that sphere without a corresponding growth in our concern for the less privileged. Our respect for life is so great that Maneka Gandhi has a special scheme for taking care of stray-dogs; but human beings are slaughtered like cattle in caste and communal riots. ('Like cattle' may be a wrong expression, since slaughtering of cattle requires special permits). There seems to be a deep cleavage between our theory and practice, our visions and their execution. According to Ashish Nandy "activism and commitment in the public sphere tend to lack prestige (among Indians) and there are few inner pressures to actualise one's ideals."³ How does one explain this?

This feature is not limited to our concern for the poor. *Dharma* is said to be the principle that regulates one's pursuit of *artha* and *kāma* and yet ours is one of the most corrupt societies in the world. The same feature is at work when responsible leaders seek to divide society on communal and caste lines so as to build a vote-bank. Clearly, it is the pursuit of political power at the cost of *dharma*, that too in the name of Ram, the very embodiment of *dharma*! Tolerance is a hallmark of our culture; not only is it an undeniable fact of Indian history, but it is also immortalized in such sayings as *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. Then, whence comes the intolerance of the Muslims and now the Christians? If past history was an *alibi* to take on the Muslims, how to explain the present day demonising of the Christians of the country? After all, at least a section of these Christians has existed in the country much before Christianity was known in the West. From where comes the present threat perception? Again, is it on account of the cynical pursuit of power at the cost of *dharma*? Can we blame it all on unscrupulous politicians? Or is there something much deeper at the heart of our culture that lets politicians not only get away with such cynical games but even get rewarded with power?

Apart from such large issues, the same paradox is encountered in matters of everyday life, like purity, one of the precepts of common *dharma*. Scholars like Dumont considered this to be so important as to make it the key principle of Indian social organization. However, its practice is more ritualistic than actual. It is not unusual to find even the people

of the upper castes (who pay great attention to cleanliness of one's own body and home) paying scant attention to the cleanliness of the street right in front of the home (that is, assuming that they do not actually throw the dirt from the house on to the public road outside). In such cases not only is any developed ethical sense missing, but even ordinary civic sense seems to be missing. How do we explain this?

India Today very correctly labelled this feature of our culture as "double-think, double-speak."⁴ It is as if the plan of an incomparable mansion drawn up by the best architects were to get moth-eaten for lack of resources to execute the plan. Or as if a most beautiful car has been built but cannot move for lack of fuel. Obviously, if we are to actualize contemporary India's quest for freedom and liberation, it is important to trace the roots of this typically Indian version of schizophrenia. Somewhere at the heart of our cultural system there seems to be a deep contradiction. Where are we to locate it? This paper is an attempt to explore this question.

We may be mistaken in looking at the well articulated philosophical theories for the root of our cultural malaise since they may not be representative of the lived philosophy of our people. Therefore, in place of an exclusive focus on written philosophy which could be a view of the elites, we need to look at our society as a whole to find the key to what we are in search of. Empirical studies are not enough either, since they are often unable to provide the larger picture. It is here that the approach of

Louis Dumont becomes important. The focus of his study is on the ideology of caste, i.e., “as a system of ideas and values.”⁵ Complaining that “nowadays, ideology is often sacrificed to the empirical aspect, but sometimes the reverse is done, or else the two may be opposed absolutely to each other,”⁶ he undertakes a study that is meant to be both textual and contextual. This seems to me to be the correct approach.

Besides the approach, the subject matter (caste) is important in itself for inquiring into the prospects for liberation. This is especially so because Dumont sees a fundamental opposition between hierarchy (identified as the fundamental value in caste system) and equality. Therefore, we shall take caste as the focus of our study to see if it can provide a clue that will explain the puzzling features our culture. In the process we will also examine whether there is a basic opposition between caste and equality.

Studying caste from the perspective of the disadvantaged, J.P. Mencher makes two observations. First, for the people at the lowest level of the caste hierarchy “caste has functioned and (continues to function) as a very effective system of economic exploitation. Second, one of the functions of the system has been to prevent the formation of social classes with any commonality of interest or unity of purpose.”⁷ The latter feature explains – partly at least – the failure of Independent India’s attempts to abolish caste. But it also raises the question: how does caste prevent the formation of social classes? This will be another of

my concerns in this paper. In trying to find answers to these questions I will be approaching caste as cultural system, and not primarily as a system of social stratification.

1. Caste as Culture

1.1 Terminology

So far I have been using the words ‘culture,’ ‘society,’ and ‘hierarchy,’ in an intuitive manner. Now is the time to bring more precision to these concepts. By ‘culture’ I mean a humanly constructed world of language, concepts, ideas, technology etc. As such, culture is contrasted with nature: tables and chairs come in culture; rivers, trees and stones belong to nature. However, the natural world, in as much as it is experienced and articulated by humans in a language, is also a part of the cultural world because language and ideas are a part of the cultural world. We talk of a cultural “world” because a culture is always a system, an ordered whole. That is to say, the different items found in a culture are not discrete, unconnected entities, but are always ordered in a such a manner as to form an integral meaningful whole. Therefore, a culture is always a cosmos, as opposed to a chaos. And in as much as meaning is a function of such ordering, a cosmos is a meaningful whole whereas a chaos is made up of meaningless, unconnected entities. Thus, we can define culture as the meaning-system in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their conduct in society. Due to this function of guiding one’s conduct, culture has an intimate link with ethics.

What about 'ideology,' the term used by Dumont? Ideology, as a system of ideas, beliefs and values, may be taken as identical with culture for the present. I shall point out later that culture is a larger whole that could include more than one ideology.

A society, in contrast to culture, is the actual organization and the rules according to which one's conduct is guided in relation to others.⁸ One is a logico-meaningful integration, whereas the other is a causal functional integration.⁹ While the two are related, one is not reducible to the other. According to Firth,

If ... society is taken to be an organized set of individuals with a given way of life, culture is that way of life. If society is taken to be an aggregate of social relations, then culture is the content of those relations. Society emphasizes the human component, the aggregate of people and the relations between them. Culture emphasizes the component of accumulated resources, immaterial as well as material, which the people inherit, employ, transmute, add to, and transmit.¹⁰

How shall we understand 'hierarchy,' the key concept in Dumont's study of caste? We define hierarchy as a ranking (of persons) in society such that some are considered superior and others inferior. Without such ranking we would not be able to give any sense to 'hierarchy.' However, such ranking requires a principle, a value -such as purity, wealth or power- upon which some are judged superior or inferior (in relation to others).¹¹ If there is one such principle involved in ranking we can call that a pure hierarchy. Ordinarily, a

characteristic mark of pure hierarchy is that one's ranking could change. For example, one who is superior in terms of wealth could lose the wealth and then be classed in the lower level of the hierarchy.

Armed with these definitions let us have a look at some of Dumont's views on caste which are as well known as they are controversial. I shall focus upon just three points which I consider important for understanding our culture. They are: the guiding principle (essence) of caste system, its implications for equality and social change, and the role (or the lack of it) of the renouncer in the Indian social organisation.

1.2 Hierarchy and Difference

Hierarchy and division have always been recognized as the two basic principles of caste.¹² Dumont, however, takes hierarchy as the primary principle, encompassing the principle of division. How far is he justified in doing this? In this section we shall focus on this question.

The distinction between culture and society enables us draw a distinction between cultural hierarchy and social hierarchy. When the most basic principle of a meaning-system is that of superiority/inferiority, we can call that culture hierarchical. A hierarchical culture does not necessarily mean a hierarchical society. A society becomes hierarchical only when one single value or principle is found to be operative in its social ranking, i.e., when one value or principle is universally operative in a society to rank all its members. This enables us to raise the question whether

the ranking involved in caste is social or cultural or both. Do Indians use a single value such as purity to rank themselves as well as others?

This is a major point of difference between Dumont and Gupta. According to Dumont there is a single principle operative in caste-system; the ideological and the social systems coincide. And the principle is “the opposition of pure and impure.”¹³ Brahmins, the most pure, are at the top of the hierarchy, and the Untouchables, the most impure or the polluted are at the bottom. It is such a comprehensive, universal principle that even such important factors as power and authority have to bow before the awesome dignity of ritual purity. These only enter surreptitiously at the interstitial levels.

Gupta disagrees. He points out a number of facts which militate against this view. I shall only point out one.¹⁴ The opposition between purity and pollution, which Dumont finds as the one principle operative in caste ranking, is a Brahminical view, says Gupta. Others in the social hierarchy do not see themselves this way. For example, there is a vast difference between the Brahminical view of the Chamars and their own view of themselves. According to the orthodox view Chamars originate from a boatman and a Chandal woman. However, the Chamars see themselves as descendants of the youngest of four Brahmin brothers, who was sent by the others to rescue a drowning cow. But before he could reach the spot the cow dies and the elder brothers force him to remove the carcass. Once that was done

the hapless youngster is turned out of the caste and given the name Chamar. Upon this view it is the Chamars who come off as superior to the Brahmins: they are of better character (compassionate to the cow, obedient to elders, ready to work), whereas the Brahmins come across as cheats who take advantage of their seniority to deprive the younger one of his due. Gupta also gives other examples and concludes: “Caste legends of Doms, Chamars, Chasa, Dhoba, Kahars, [and others] all proclaim exalted origins which of course the Brahminical texts vehemently deny.”¹⁵ In other words, ideologically, there is not one but many hierarchies. Therefore, Dumont’s claim to have found the one overarching principle of caste system in the opposition between purity and pollution does not hold.

According to Gupta, difference - and not hierarchy- is the clue to understanding caste and the Indian society. It must be noted that while making this contrast between difference and hierarchy, Gupta is referring to social or Brahminic hierarchy and not to cultural hierarchy. This becomes clear when he talks about multiple hierarchies at the ideological level.¹⁶ While hierarchy is quantitative or quantifiable, difference is qualitative.¹⁷ Wealth, the basis of class hierarchy, for example, can be quantified and people ranked as upper class, middle class and so on. Not so with difference. The diverse religious and linguistic groupings are Gupta’s examples. They are just differentiated, not ranked. This qualitative feel of difference is best shown in Bougle’s description of “repulsion,” which he

considers to be the spirit of caste. By repulsion he means that the different groups of which a caste society is composed,

repel each other rather than attract, that each retires within itself, isolates itself, makes every effort to prevent its members from contracting alliances or even from entering into relations with neighbouring groups. A man refuses to seek a wife outside his traditional circle, ... and regard the mere contact of 'strangers' as impure and degrading. Such is the man who obeys the 'spirit of caste.' Horror of misalliance, fear of impure contacts and repulsion for all those who are unrelated, such are the characteristic signs of this spirit.¹⁸

Repulsion, according to Gupta, emphasises the differences between castes. The characteristic mark of caste system, therefore, is not hierarchy but difference, he argues. Unlike hierarchy, where we can classify people on the basis of a single variable, there is no such single variable in the caste system. "The need to separate is accompanied by a certain reverence and pride in one's own customs and traditions which is not easily jettisoned just to fall in line with orthodoxy."¹⁹ He gives abundant evidence to show this. Along the same lines A.M. Shah, based on his study of castes in Gujarat, shows that the principle of difference (division) has priority over hierarchy in the Indian social organisation.²⁰ Further, unlike ordinary hierarchies like class where 'they' can become a 'we' and vice versa, one cannot change one's caste.

In as much as the discrete caste ideologies involve a ranking where each caste comes out on top, we may call

the whole culture hierarchical. But it will not be a pure hierarchy since there is no one principle in terms of which this ranking is done. Different castes can use different principles for the purpose. Therefore, we conclude that caste is first and foremost a cultural system and only secondarily a system of social stratification. Caste as culture involves multiple hierarchies, but there is only one hierarchy at the social level, the Brahminical one.

1.3 From Caste Culture to Caste Society

How does caste as culture involving multiple ideological systems get transformed into a single social system? This is a matter of complex history – involving racial, cultural, economic, geographical and political factors – to which I cannot do justice here. But this much can be definitely said: the existence of multiple cultural hierarchies is a clear indication that the hierarchy based on the Brahminical ideology that came to dominate the larger society was not willingly accepted by the members at the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. In other words, the early rivalries that arose when the different groups came into contact with one another was settled not so much through negotiations as through force and superior fighting power.²¹ Thus, some were subjugated, others were co-opted and so on, to form one social hierarchy. According to Gupta, if the lower castes, in spite of the multiple cultural hierarchies, "do abide on the ground by the ranking of purity inflicted upon them by the ideology of some other castes, then it is because of the conjoint working

of the principles of economics and/or politics...”²² This seems to be borne out by facts.²³ He sees social hierarchy to be not the essence but a property of caste, a historical accretion, which can be dispensed with as the ground situation changes.

Once such a social hierarchy is established, the ideology of the dominant groups gains prominence and it is given legal sanction. The different groups are given autonomy in dealing with members of their own group, but in relation to other groups, the social hierarchy is supreme. In short, it would seem that our traditional ethico-legal structure is nothing more than a legitimation of the power structure that already existed in society.

1.4 Caste and Social Change: An Initial Assessment

The difference between Dumont and Gupta has important implications for social change. A society in which the cultural and social systems merge will be resistant to change. This is one of the implications of *Homo Hierarchicus*.²⁴ When one’s meanings, values and aspirations are already in force in a society, how could there be change? The divergence between cultural system and social system, on the other hand, is conducive to changes involving caste mobility. When the ground conditions are favourable an alternative hierarchy in the culture asserts itself. As Gupta says, “the other hierarchy is always there waiting for a propitious moment to extravert itself generally over the entire society.”²⁵ Although Indian society is often described as unchanging, this is not

borne out by facts. Changes, especially in terms of caste mobility, is not an uncommon feature of our society.

On the other hand, it is also true that any revolutionary change like the French revolution or the Russian revolution is alien to India. If deprivation of the masses, combined with the amassing of wealth by few, were to lead to revolution, the absence of revolutionary changes in India needs some explaining. It cannot merely be a case of absence of leadership. Dedicated and charismatic revolutionaries have not been wanting in independent India. Yet their impact has been very limited. How can one explain this? How does caste become a barrier to the forming of social classes, as observed by Mencher? Is there some truth in Dumont’s thesis after all? I suggest that there is. While Dumont is wrong is thinking that there is a convergence of cultural and social hierarchies, he is right in his basic intuition about the opposition between caste culture and egalitarianism.

2. Caste Culture and Equality

In order to see this we need to realize that the basic opposition is not so much between hierarchy and equality as Dumont proposed, but between caste culture – including its multiple hierarchies and difference – and equality. When the opposition is seen in this manner, our finding that difference is the primary principle of caste strengthens rather than weakens Dumont’s point. This is what I propose to show in this section. Let us begin with a critique of Dumont’s view.

2.1 Dumont and His Critics

Dumont undertakes his study with a view to showing the readers that caste teaches a most fundamental principle of social organization, namely, hierarchy, as opposed to the principle of equality. The former is said to be the characteristic of traditional societies and the latter, of modern societies; the former is based on the collective nature of man, the latter on the individual nature. About the former, Dumont goes so far as to say that “on the level of life in the world the individual is not.”²⁶ Traditional societies, based on hierarchy, are not egalitarian whereas modern societies, based on equality and liberty, are egalitarian. Needless to say that he places Indian society in the former category.

This has been severely criticized, not only by those Indians brought up on a daily diet of the glories of India’s golden past, but also by reputed social scientists. André Beteille takes him to task for drawing such black and white distinctions between two types of society and identifying the one with Indian and the other with Western society. He considers both *homo hierarchicus* and *homo equalis* as paste-board characters.

Perhaps such characters have a certain pedagogical function in so far as they make quick and sharp contrasts possible between societies widely separated in space and time. But a major civilization, such as the Indian or the Western, is too rich and too complex to be adequately portrayed by the one to the exclusion of the other.²⁷

This, I think, is a valid point. Neither hierarchy nor equality can be

taken as empirical statements characteristic of a society to the exclusion of the other. Even at the time of slavery there would have been slave masters who treated their slaves with a degree of dignity and compassion.²⁸ Similarly, discrimination or inequality is also a universal feature of societies in as much as human dealings with one another require some evaluation in terms of merit, quality or worth.²⁹ Therefore, hierarchy and equality must not be taken as empirical judgements on society such that one excludes the other. A close knit family is a good example of the empirical mix of the two values. Equality and hierarchy, then, must be taken as “ideal types”³⁰; conceptually they exclude one another, not empirically. They help us make useful judgements on the empirical reality.

Having recognized this, the basic question still remains. Is caste culture basically opposed to egalitarianism? Dumont contrasted hierarchy with equality in the mistaken belief that our society is a pure hierarchy built on the opposition between the pure and the impure. Does the finding that difference, not hierarchy, is the basic principle of caste also show that caste culture is compatible with equality?

From the finding that difference and not hierarchy is the essence of caste, Gupta draws the conclusion that they are “logically of equal status.”³¹ I am not sure what conclusion to draw from this. Does it mean that logical equality is adequate for ethical action and social liberation? That there is no basic opposition between caste and equality? While I do not know of any

scholar who has explicitly stated so, in one place Gupta does say, “with differences comes the notion of equality,” without qualifying the notion of equality.³² Similarly, the basic thrust of Béteille’s argument in “*Homo Hierarchicus, Homo Equalis*” also seems to be that there is no incompatibility between caste and social equality. He writes: “I find it difficult to believe that the idea of human beings as equal claimants to justice in this broad sense [i.e., human beings as human beings] can be the monopoly of any society or culture to the exclusion of all others.”³³ If it merely means that equality and inequality are to be taken as ideal types rather than as exclusive characterizations of any society, nothing more needs to be said about it. But if it means that caste culture makes no difference to ethical conduct and social liberation then it is based on a confusion. Let us analyse the concept of equality so as to see the different senses in which it is used and identify the one that is appropriate to ethical action.

2.2 Types of Equality

i) *Logical Equality*: Equality is logical if it is necessary for certain concepts and principles to be operative. An excellent example is provided by Béteille. He argues: “...the ends of justice are defeated when equals are treated unequally, but also when unequals are treated equally.... [It is impossible to] formulate the principle of justice without some consideration of equality, however residual.” This is a conceptual requirement: the concept of justice necessarily requires the concept of equality; one cannot be conceived

without the other. Similarly the concept of difference and repulsion logically requires the existence of another from which the one is differentiated or repulsed. Therefore, if difference is the basic principle of caste, then it is a logical requirement that there be other groups in society for there to be any difference or repulsion. In this sense Gupta is right in claiming that the concept of difference implies that they are of *logically* equal status, i.e., they are equal as existents in society.

ii) *Empirical equality*: At the other extreme of logical equality is empirical equality. Whereas logical equality is a conceptual matter, empirical equality is a matter of experience and observation. Thus two people could be equal in height, weight, function in society, and so on. In the social realm, inequality is as much - if not more- a matter of experience as equality. Thus people can be unequal in merit, quality, worth, etc. and these are not specific to any society as Béteille reminds us.

iii) *Metaphysical equality*: Let me first explain the concept of metaphysics. The concept of metaphysics is a sort of hybrid between the logical and the empirical. A metaphysical principle is not empirical: it cannot be observed, and in this sense, it is like the logical. On the other hand, it is said to have an extra-mental or extra-conceptual or extra-linguistic existence in reality. In this it is unlike the logical which is purely a conceptual matter. For this type of knowledge which is distinct from both the logical and the empirical, but has the characteristics of both, Kant used the technical term “synthetic *a priori*.”

The most discussed example of a metaphysical principle is perhaps the principle of causality. This concept entails the idea of necessity, which Hume showed, cannot be observed. One can observe a metal being heated and also that it has expanded, but one cannot observe any necessary connection between the two. Kant agreed with Hume that the causal principle is not observational but made the distinction between the causal principle (“Every event has a cause”) and a causal law (“Metal expands when heated”). He argued that the former is synthetic *a priori* and hence not based on experience; rather it is the very condition of experience: without it we will not be able to explain or predict anything and science itself would be impossible. Here, then, is a principle that is like the logical, but is not about concepts but about reality. A causal law, in contrast is based on experience: relying on the truth of the causal principle we inquire into the cause of an event and come to a conclusion based on our experience.

Metaphysical equality is similar to the causal principle. It is not based on experience and hence not an empirical concept. Nor is it simply a conceptual matter like logical equality. Without the principle of metaphysical equality we would not be able to explain certain of our ordinary human experiences. How are we to explain, for example, a boy and a girl judged to be a complete mismatch by others falling in love leading to a happy married life? Or, how do we explain the fact that a complete stranger in need (hence, empirically speaking, having nothing in common with me) can

evoke my compassion? The most frequent use of the principle of metaphysical equality, however, is in the realm of spirituality and mysticism. Thus, in Christianity every human is a child of God; in Islam a servant of God; in Advaita Atman is not different from the Brahman, and so on, each of which implies equality of humans *as* humans, even when there may be no observable respect in which they are equal.

iv) *Ethical Equality or equality of persons*: This is related to metaphysical equality, but different. It is an application of the metaphysical principle to the empirical realm in the form of an ethical norm. The best formulation of such a norm is found in Kant when he says, “I am never to act otherwise than so *that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.*”³⁴ Here, then, is a basic criterion of a moral norm: can the principle on which I act be applied to anyone in my situation? Such universalizability implies an equality of persons that is not based on one’s birth, socio-economic status, etc. In other words, it affirms that metaphysical equality is applicable to human beings in concrete situations.

With these distinctions in mind let us look at the implications of caste culture for ethical behaviour. First let us make a general point about caste culture. A multiplicity of cultural hierarchies where each caste is superior to the other implies that the basic pattern of thinking is in terms of ‘we’ and ‘they,’ in-group and out-group. In the case of each, ‘we’ are superior and the others inferior. Gupta seems to acknowledge

this exaltation of the 'we' over 'they.'³⁵ Moreover, unlike in class, the 'they' of caste can never become a 'we' or vice versa. This is the significance of the finding that difference or repulsion is the spirit of caste. This is an important feature of caste culture, which has implications for ethics.

This point about caste culture needs some clarification. The distinction between in-group and out-group is a universal phenomenon and is not specific to India. Ordinarily one belongs to more than one in-group at the same time, such as family, nation, linguistic group, and so on. What is specific to caste culture is the absence of a very important in-group, i.e., the 'human' group, as I hope to show. Among all the in-groups this one has very special significance for ethics.

2.3 Ethical Relativism

What does it mean to belong to an in-group called the humans? It means that in spite of the other in-groups such as family, caste or nation to which I belong, there are contexts in which when even a total stranger is made a part of the 'we' in as much as the other is a human person. There is hardly any empirical basis for such a grouping and it is based on the metaphysical concept of person. And this is what seems to be missing in our culture. It is not that we lack the concept of metaphysical equality, as applied to the religious context. We have already noted its existence. Therefore, Bêteille is right in saying that equality of humans as humans is not the monopoly of any one "society or culture."

What is missing in this account of Bêteille is the distinction between nature and culture. Metaphysical equality of human beings is a fact about human nature, and not an item of any culture.³⁶ In as much as it is a fact about human nature, it would be surprising if we are totally unable to feel with members of an out-group merely as human beings. This fact about human nature becomes an item of culture only when it is apprehended as a fact and given its due place in one's world-view or meaning system in terms of which one can interpret experience and guide one's conduct. When metaphysical equality becomes an item of culture it takes the form of ethical equality or equality of persons, implying the universalisability of one's moral norm.

Upon this point, the relativism of traditional Indian ethics is well known. "The question 'what would happen if everyone did this' has never cut ice in India."³⁷ According to Dandekar, "In spite of the comprehensive character of dharma, in its most common connotation it was limited to two principal ideals, namely... [varna and ashrama]. Thus, in popular parlance, dharma almost came to mean just varna-ashrama-dharma, that is the dharmas (ordained duties) of the four classes [sic!] and the four stages of life."³⁸ In other words, although we have the concept of *samanyadharmā*, in practice what counts is varna-ashrama-dharma. The implication is this: "In our society there is caste ethics and there are group norms, but there is no such thing as Indian social norms. Thus there is hardly any criteria of right and wrong, honest and dishonest, permissible and

impermissible applicable across the board.”³⁹ In other words, ethical equality does not find a place in our culture. Even in such most fundamental issue as one’s right to life, the Brahmin and the Sudra do not stand on equal grounds.

2.4 The Missing ‘Person’

This is not surprising because the notion of person -someone who is always treated as an end and never as a means- is crucial to ethical universalism. The concept of a person is quite different from that of a soul or *atman*. A person is a concrete observable entity, an *atman*-in-the-world, very different from other observable beings. A person is one to whom we can attribute both mental and physical properties,⁴⁰ a moral agent to whom moral praise and blame can be attached;⁴¹ which is not the case with a soul or *atman*. It is on account of such differences from other beings that person is considered a category by itself and differentiated from other beings. Seen thus, it is not hard to see that the concept of person is very underdeveloped, if not totally missing in our culture. The culture of our subcontinent is perhaps unique in this matter. The Japanese scholar, Hajime Nakamura, making a comparative study of the Indian, Chinese and Japanese ways of thinking comes to the conclusion that “the traditional Indian concept of man is vague; man is not seen as an individual, but only as an instance of the species of ‘living beings’...”⁴² Clearly Nakamura is using the word ‘individual’ in the sense of ‘person’ as a separate category among living beings and not in the sense of

‘individual’ as opposed to ‘social.’ In the latter sense, our culture did develop a strong sense of individualism,⁴³ where each one is concerned with his own salvation. Here again, Dumont is mistaken in contrasting the individual nature of man with his collective nature and applying it to Indian society.

What is missing is ‘individual’ in the sense of ‘person’ as an independent category, as belonging to that special and unique in-group called the human species on account of which they have a special relation to one another. Although there are some variations in the ontologies (theories of beings) of different philosophical systems, roughly they all comprise of material beings, living beings, *atman*, and the ultimate being (Brahman, Purusha etc.) Here is an example from the Bhagavadgita: “The wise look with the same eye on a Brahmin endowed with learning and culture, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and a pariah” (5/18). This could be considered typical of Indian ontology except that material beings are not mentioned here. What is noteworthy is that human person is not a category at all, whereas the Brahmin and the Pariah are placed in different categories along with cow, elephant and dog! At the human level the most -if not the only- operative concept (after *atman*) in our culture is caste. The result is that “the social nature of man did not receive the thought it deserved...”⁴⁴ This is so because the very logic of in-group out-group distinction is that the members of the in-group receive a special treatment that is denied to the out-group. Ethical universalism is the cultural expression of this special relation.

How do castes come to have the dominance it has in our ethical thinking? This becomes amenable to explanation when it is seen that “Hindu law was first formulated in a tribal society, and it was based primarily on the customary practices and relationships ... The central problem at this stage was to maintain peace between the tribes.”⁴⁵ This would seem to indicate that *varna dharma* is more concerned about maintaining peace between different groups than with any moral norms concerning all. The norms (the customary practices and relationships) prevalent within a group were not disturbed as long as they did not touch the already established hierarchical relationship between social groups. Since the basic unit here is the caste group, there is no place for an ethical norm that cuts across the different groups. This explains the divergence in the different dharmas for the different groups. Thus, the absence of the concept of person together with the existent concept of caste explains the absence of ethical universalism in our culture.

3. Social Hierarchy and Religion

Another important feature of our culture that remains to be discussed is its relation to religion. How is it that the Indian seers who saw the metaphysical equality of the humans were not able to give the concept of person to our culture, which could pose a challenge to the social system? It is here that Dumont’s observation about the institution of the renouncer becomes important. Anyone could opt out of the hierarchical social

order by becoming a *sannyasi* and be accepted by members of different castes. Dumont does not mention that someone who is not satisfied with the social order could also become a *baghi*, ordinarily termed “dacoit,” but more often than not, these are individuals who revolt against the system and are forced out of the system. *Baghis* are not a rare phenomenon in India, especially in the north. Obviously they do not enjoy a status similar to the *sannyasi* but they hold a special place – often bordering on reverence – in the imagination of the lower strata of society. Both the *baghi* (of this type) and *sannyasi* are manifestations of the intuitive grasp of metaphysical equality operative in human nature. But being outside the social order their intuition has no chance to develop into a culture. Both are outside the society, the former because he is not acceptable to the social order and the latter because he has renounced it. The *sannyasi* with his renunciation of the social order and still being acceptable to it, becomes “the safety valve for the Brahmanic order which can give a permanent place to the transcendent [i.e.; metaphysical equality in the religious realm] while remaining outside the range of its attacks”⁴⁶ i.e., without metaphysical equality becoming an empirically applicable (hence, socially challenging) concept of personal equality. Therefore, the *sannyasi* ideal was not merely accepted, but encouraged. This makes it possible for the renouncer’s ideas to enter into the culture, but only after being filtered through the medium of the Brahmin who is very much a part of the established social order.⁴⁷

This bifurcation of religion and society results in the social structures getting unduly enervated at the expense of religion which gets emasculated. Religion is emasculated by stripping it of its prophetic dimension that is bound to arise when the mystical intuition of metaphysical equality is allowed to develop into personal equality. S.S. Gill draws attention to this emasculation of religion when he says that “the *Dharmashastras* treated divinity rather lightly, and even gods were not overly burdened by their holiness,”⁴⁸ i.e., not burdened by the ethical aspect of their behaviour. With this bifurcation, religion of the man-in-the-world is reduced to the externals such as the rituals, choice of one’s favourite deity, etc. There can be great freedom in one’s choice of such emasculated religion that has been reduced to being a handmaid of the existing power structure. Most discussions about our great religious tolerance neglect the fact that the religion so tolerant is an emasculated one that has no say in our social organisation, that it goes hand in hand with the great rigidity of the social structure. The two would seem to be two sides of the same coin.

One of the most important implications of understanding this relationship between caste society and religion is that it puts a question mark on our present understanding of caste as a Hindu religious phenomenon. If the given analysis of the relationship between social hierarchy and religion is correct, it would mean that caste has no intrinsic link to genuine religion; just the opposite is the case in as much as it

is the result of the bifurcation of religion and society. Rather than considering it a religious phenomenon it should be understood as a social and cultural phenomena, a legitimation of a dominant economic and political power structure. Only such an understanding will be in keeping with the empirical findings which show that all the religions and ideological groups of the subcontinent are permeated by caste culture. Different writers have commented on the caste base of our communist groups. The same is true of religions in India. Although Gandhiji was very much under the spell of the myth that caste is a Hindu phenomenon, he also recognized that all religions – even those which did not originate India – were affected by it the moment they entered the country.⁴⁹ A good example is the Kerala Christians who came to be looked upon as three different castes within the larger hierarchical society.⁵⁰ As in the larger society, religion for the Syrian Christians – who have existed in India from the beginning of Christianity – became a matter of choosing one’s favourite deity (in this case Jesus Christ), and zealously preserving one’s ritual practices (which lies at the centre of the present day rites controversy). While the egalitarian ideology of their religion may not have been totally lost, it was not given any major say in their social attitudes. Even if the Christians were to escape being three different groups, the larger society would still have assigned them a specific place within the hierarchy, thus making them effectively one caste among the many. That is the logic of the principle of difference which we have found to be basic to caste culture. Only those

tribals who have remained away from the main stream have escaped this culture.

Caste can be considered a Hindu phenomenon only in so far as the dominant culture of the subcontinent is Hindu. On this basis to label it a feature of Hinduism is like labelling Western capitalism as a feature of Christianity. Both are cultural sedimentations of their complex histories. While the historical factors are different in both, they have these in common: (1) both are legitimations of certain power structures in society, (2) the appearance of both is closely linked to an emasculation of religion. The emasculation itself takes place through different historical processes which cannot be treated here.

To sum up: so far we have found the following as the main features of caste as culture: difference, which implies a 'we-they' pattern of thinking; non-existence of the concept of person, which leads to ethical relativism; emasculation of religion, with its corollary of great freedom in the choice of one's preferred deity, rituals etc. as long as it does not challenge the established social order. Now let us examine the explanatory power of this understanding of caste as culture.

4. Some Implications

I have focused on the ethical dimension of our culture throughout the article. As such it also explains most of the paradoxical features our culture with which we began. One last point on it will be seen in the next section. Here in this section, I shall focus only on some other issues that have been raised.

i) *Social Change*: Our understanding of caste as culture places us in a position to have a more comprehensive understanding of social change in Indian society than is available today. We noted earlier that upon Dumont's view where cultural hierarchy and social hierarchy converge there is hardly any room for social change, except within a caste. Thus there could be rivalries within the group and change in caste leadership is possible. This is noted by Dumont. But the position of the caste group within the larger society does not change. With the finding that there are different cultural hierarchies, with their implied logical equality, inter-caste rivalries and changes at the caste level also becomes possible. Thus a given caste need not always remain at the same level of the social hierarchy: caste mobility is not only possible, it is also a fact. Gupta's contribution helps to explain this. Now with the finding that the basic unit of value in our culture is the caste and not the person, we are also able to explain why there have been no revolutionary changes in Indian society. Lacking the concept of person at the cultural level means that while caste as a social unit can change its position in the social hierarchy, there is no way in which members of all castes can come together against unjust rulers (persons) in a revolutionary uprising, as in the case of the French, Russian or the Chinese. In other words, it explains Mencher's finding that caste prevents the formation of social classes.

ii) *Divisiveness of Indian Society*: The eternal divisiveness of Indian society is well known. Although this has not been one of our concerns, our

understanding of caste throws light on this feature as well. It becomes amenable to explanation when we realize that the spirit of caste culture is division or repulsion, that its basic mode of thinking is in terms of “we” and “they.” Tara Ali Baig once observed that our unity in diversity, which we constantly mention with pride, becomes evident only under severe external threat as in 1962, 1965, and 1971.⁵¹ The prevalence of this pattern of thinking is borne out by Indian history including the independence struggle.⁵² The ideology of the RSS and its affiliates and the present day attempts to unify “Hindu society” by inventing a “they” in the Muslims and presently in the Christians would seem to be a continuation of the same pattern of thinking.

Understanding caste as culture also explains why the Syrian Christians who were in the country for centuries were not considered a threat by the rest of society: they were very much a part of the caste culture, as explained above. If the minuscule percentage of Christians in India is seen today as a threat by fundamentalist Hindus, it has less to do with any conversions or demographic factors than with the fact that Christians have come to lay more emphasis on the egalitarian nature of their religious ideology and have become more outward looking. This change in their attitude itself has a great deal to do with the legitimacy gained by egalitarian values in independent India.

5. The Present and the Future

Caste culture underwent a process of ferment and deep churning during the

Indian Renaissance and the Independence movement. The leaders of the movement were sharply divided on whether freedom from the British or the reform of society should get priority. Even when independence was given priority, the need for socio-cultural reform was never in doubt. This finds expression in the writings of people like Gandhi and Vivekananda with their emphasis on *antnyodaya* and *daridranarayana*. Our Renaissance thinkers seem to be the first to bring out the ethical implications of our ancient intuition about metaphysical equality. This is a break with tradition.⁵³ Gandhi, aware of the unorthodox nature of this interpretation of *Vedanta*, tries to give a traditional backing to his humanism in a very unusual way. He makes cow-protection (not any scriptures or any particular way of looking at the deity, etc.) the “central fact of Hinduism” and then argues that a religion that worships the cow cannot be cruel to humans!⁵⁴ The most emphatic expression of this new found humanism is in the Constitution of independent India, with its egalitarian values. The single most achievement of this development was the legitimisation of egalitarianism. This official acceptance of egalitarianism has had two impacts: one negative and the other positive.

On the negative side, it has led to the double-think and double-speak mentioned in the beginning. Since the makers of the Constitution as well as most of the first generation leaders of independent India were committed to egalitarian values, that set the standard of political discourse which reaches its culmination in the *garibi hatao* slogan

of Indira Gandhi. At the same time, power remained in the hands of the traditional power groups and the official legitimacy given to egalitarianism hardly found concrete expression in crucial issues like land reforms. This is especially the case in the Hindi heartland which hardly experienced the cultural Renaissance, but had the dominant say in the power structure. Lacking in the cultural concept of person, even those who sought genuine reform like Swami Sahajanand and the socialists were handicapped. There was no cultural basis on which people could be mobilized to pressurise the leadership to carry out reforms. Its execution was solely dependent on the good will of the political leadership which increasingly passed into the hands of the agents of traditional power structure. Thus political mobilisation continues to be along caste lines even today. But for the sake of legitimacy from the educated middle class and from the West they continue to talk the language of equality.

On the other hand, the very fact of having to function -at least outwardly- within the bounds of an egalitarian Constitution had also a positive impact. First, national rituals such as Independence and Republic day celebrations gave occasions for people to come together irrespective of caste loyalties which give some boost to an egalitarian culture. Second, the very exercise of universal franchise, in spite of its gross misuse by traditional power holders in many parts of the country, has had a similar impact. It is precisely such exercises that enable the concept of person to grow in our consciousness. To some extent it is also true of education,

although due to the neglect of primary education (where the traditionally underprivileged would be the beneficiaries) its impact is not as much as it could have been.

What are the future prospects? If the cultural dynamo of liberation is the concept of person, then the prospects for liberation would depend upon making it an integral part of our culture. This requires both intellectual and field work. Our Renaissance thinkers, preoccupied as they were with building up the self-confidence of our people against the colonial powers, mostly adopted the strategy of affirming the greatness of our past. While they were critical of caste discriminations, most of them, including Gandhiji, saw it as a historical accretion that has nothing to do with the spirit of Indian culture. (Ambedkar is an exception). Our culture, no doubt, has many excellent qualities to recommend itself and they were perhaps right in taking that approach at that time. Now half a century after the independence, the same strategy would be self-defeating. If we are to adequately respond to the quest of our people for liberation, it is time that we boldly looked at and saw the gaping holes in our cultural firmament. Only with the realization that the concept of person - the foundation of personal equality and ethical universalism- is missing, will we be able to take steps that are adequate to correcting the situation. Together with such efforts, there is also the need for serious work to unearth and create a positive identity of being an Indian, an identity that is not dependent on an "other" as done by the ideologues of caste culture. On the ground, the

process set in motion by the working of our egalitarian Constitution must be continued and vigorously pursued in collaboration with all who share these values.

Indian Christians, I believe, can play a major role in promoting a culture of person. Not only do they have a developed concept of person but they have also become aware of the egalitarian nature of their religion. Obviously promoting such a culture is not an easy task and it may not have immediate tangible results. But once the need is realized we could engage in a realistic evaluation of the various services we offer to the nation from this perspective. In this respect, I believe, our less glamorous undertakings like the rural schools (which are often located in the midst of the neglected ones of society but where other castes are welcomed), the lowly work of Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity

etc., will have a greater impact in the longer run than most of our elite institutions. Since such works involve neither power nor prestige, the value attached to persons as persons become more transparent in such situations.⁵⁵ Presently even such works have come to face opposition, even to the extent of accusing Amartya Sen's advocacy of primary education as a foreign conspiracy! But there are sufficient indications to show that the process set in motion by our Renaissance thinkers cannot be rolled back. Seen from this perspective, opposition to such works would seem to be the parting shot of the caste culture that has begun to feel the impact of the working out of our Constitution and its values and, hence, could even be a positive sign. The contemporary stress on human rights at the global level is also a positive sign since it provides a conducive atmosphere for promoting the culture of person.⁵⁶

Notes

1. M. Chatterjee, *The Concept of Spirituality*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1989, p.21,27.
2. Quoted in M. Chatterjee, p.36.
3. Quoted in *India Today* August 31, 1983, p.7
4. Ibid.
5. L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchichus: The Caste System and its Implications*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970; Delhi: Vias Publications, 1971, p.36.
6. Ibid., p.37.
7. J.P. Mencher, "The Caste System Upside Down," in D.Gupta, (ed.), *Social Stratification* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992, p.93.
8. Besides Gupta, I am indebted to Clifford Geertz for this distinction. See, Geertz, "Ritual and Social Change," in W.A.Lessa and E.Z.Vogt (eds.), *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, New York: Harper and Row, 1958, P.533.
9. Geertz, p.533.
10. R. Firth, *Elements of Social Organization*, London: Watts, 1951, p.27. Quoted in M. Singer, "The Concept of Culture," in D. Sills, ed., *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, The MacMillan Company & The Free Press, 1968, vol.3, p.533.

11. This general definition of hierarchy is based on the common element present in the differing definitions of Dumont and Dipankar Gupta. See, D. Gupta, "Continuous Hierarchies and Discrete Castes," in Gupta, pp.116-19.
12. A.M. Shah and I.P. Desai, *Division and Hierarchy: An Overview of Caste in Gujarat*, Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1988, p.2. A note about terminology: In the place of 'division' other authors use terms such as 'difference' (Pocock, Gupta), and 'repulsion' (Bougle). I use these terms interchangeably. Similarly, following Gupta, I shall not make a distinction between *varna* and *jati* while talking about caste.
13. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 59.
14. Gupta, "Continuous...", p.122.
15. D.Gupta, "Hierarchy and Difference: An Introduction," in Gupta, p.12
16. Gupta, p.13-14.
17. Gupta, p.8
18. Bougle, "The Essence and Reality of the Caste System," in Gupta, ed., p.65.
19. Gupta, p.128
20. Shah and Desai, p.3.
21. This contention, I think, will be borne out by a close reading of ancient Indian history. See, R.Thapar, *From Lineage to State*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990. A.L. Basham, *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989. It is also not hard to see that crude force and masculine power continues to enjoy a very special place in our culture. "Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated... [because] Gandhi, it was believed, had betrayed nationalist Hinduism both because of his rejection of Brahmanical values, particularly its *esteem of masculine powers*, and his perfidious partition of India." See, Ashish Nandy, *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980, p.78. cited in Roger Friedland and Richard Hecht, "The Bodies of Nations: A comparative Study of Violence in Jerusalem and Ayodhya," in *History of Religions*, vol.38/2, pp.144-5). italics added. See also, p.145
22. Gupta, p.118.
23. See, Gupta, p.132, Shah and Desai, p.xiii.
24. A.Béteille, *The Idea of Natural Inequality and Other Essays*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983, p.35.
25. Gupta, p.14.
26. L. Dumont, *Religion, Politics and History in India*, The Hague: Mouton, 1970, p.42.
27. Béteille, p.35.
28. A. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1933, repr. 1948, p.23
29. Béteille, p.36
30. My use of this term is influenced by Eric Fromm and Vincent Bruemmer. Fromm acknowledges his indebtedness to Weber and to Jung. See, E.Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, New York: Harper and Row, 1956, p.35.; V.Bruemmer, *The Model of Love*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.157
31. Gupta, p.13
32. Gupta, P.17.
33. Béteille, p.36
34. I. Kant, "The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals," in *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics*, tr.by T.Kingsmill Ab-

- bot, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 6th ed., p.18. italics original. A positive account of the norm is “*Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*” Ibid. p.38. italics original.
35. Gupta, p.12.
 36. I am aware that some philosophers consider human nature itself a cultural construct. But it makes no difference to the point being made here as long as the distinction between nature and culture is maintained. Just as the principle of causality can be considered as fact of nature distinct from a causal law which is cultural product, so too metaphysical equality of humans can be considered a fact, whereas the particular ways of conceiving persons are cultural products. My contention is precisely that our cultural construction of person is inadequate.
 37. M. Chatterjee, p.45. She makes this observation in the context of the *sannyasi* ideal. But it seems equally applicable to our ethics.
 38. R.N. Dandekar, “Dharma, the First End of Man,” in W.T. de Bary, S. Hay, et al. (eds.), *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, reprint, 1988, p.218.
 39. S.S. Gill, *The Pathology of Corruption*, New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1998, p.253.
 40. P.F. Strawson, *Individuals*, New York: Anchor Books, 1963. First pub. in 1959.
 41. R.C. Pradhan, “Persons as Minded Beings: Towards a Metaphysics of Persons,” in *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* XV/3 (May-August 1998), p.23.
 42. See, *India Today*, p.7.
 43. S. Radhakrishnan and P.T.Raju, *The Concept of Man: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1960, 1966, p. 336.
 44. Ibid.
 45. R. Thapar, cited in G.S. Bhargava, “Hindu Texts Not to Blame for Injustice,” *Times of India*, Mumbai, March 1, 1999, p.10.
 46. L.Dumont, *Religion, Politics and History in India*, p.51.
 47. L. Dumont, *Religion ...*, pp.36-46
 48. S.S. Gill, p.9.
 49. See, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* vol.58, p.177.
 50. C.J. Fuller, “Kerala Christians and the Caste System,” in Gupta, p.197.
 51. T. A. Baig, “Can Indians Only Protest?,” *Sunday*, 9 August, 1981.
 52. Gandhiji recognised it explicitly when he launched the Civil Disobedience to “take the attention of the nation off the communal problem [which is another manifestation of the spirit of caste] and to rivet it on the things that are common to all Indians...” *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, xlii, pp.383-4. The process is at work when he placed the exclusive blame for the communal problem on the British in 1941.
 53. See, B.D. Bedekar, *Towards Understanding Gandhi*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1975, p.110.
 54. *Young India*, Oct. 6, 1921. S. Radhakrishnan, ed., *Mahatma Gandhi: Essays and Reflections on his Life and Work*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1939, p.472-74.
 55. This is quite contrary to the view of Marxian social analysts like Stan Lourdasamy whose analysis, it seems to me, is devoid of any cultural content.
 56. I am grateful to Mathew Jayanth, SJ, and Subhash Anand for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.