

Hierarchy and Difference: An Introduction

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The Idea of Stratification and the Caste System

Social stratification has a special place in the study of Indian society. India has long been reckoned as the most stratified of all known societies in human history. The caste system with its myriad forms of superordination and subordination, its many customs and taboos, is perhaps most responsible for conferring on India this dubious honour. But this is not all. Economically too India is highly stratified. Miserable slums border expensive residential areas in city after city in India. The indescribable poverty of the very poor has even led to a review of the limits of physical endurance at pitifully low nutritional levels. This vast polarity notwithstanding, India is also a significant economic power with a sizeable bureaucracy and technically trained personnel. Add to this the diversity of linguistic groups that make up our Indian nation state and the fact of India being the most stratified society becomes near incontrovertible.

India is also a very self-conscious society. There are endless debates in India on what should be the path of development, and what internal arrangements of power and wealth, of cultural status and economic wherewithal, are best suited to propel the country into the modern, industrial epoch. As a people Indians have been deeply involved in moral and ethical questions regarding the caste system, cultural diversity and economic inequality—all central issues of social stratification. This is reflected in our Constitution which makes any discrimination

Need for Conceptual Clarity

One must not forget that it is not at all the case that a society should exhibit only one form of social stratification. In India, for instance, the extant forms of social stratification are many. There is of course the caste system, but even this 'extreme form of social stratification' (Dumont 1988:3) coexists with occupational stratification, linguistic stratification, sexual stratification and religious stratification (to name a few). It is important for sociologists to remember that each of these forms of stratification have their own axial principles. It would do us no good if we were to be careless on this score. Any carelessness or untidiness in this matter would lead to quite basic conceptual difficulties. For instance, the oft asked query of whether caste is giving way to class, is an outcome of conceptual foginess. There is no reason to believe that if there is caste there cannot be class, nor is it the case that as one grows the other must wane. We should not forsake an elementary methodological tenet namely that a *concept should be independently defined*. Caste and class after all do not constitute a continuum.

The important point to bear in mind is that the various forms of social stratification are analytically separate and separable. Empirically we often find one form of stratification overlaid by another. Gender stratification may correspond with economic stratification, class and caste may demonstrate significant statistical correlation, or linguistic/regional groups may show a great degree of co-variation with occupational stratification. This should not tempt us to conflate or submerge one category of stratification with another. The co-variation between two or more forms of stratification asks for a higher order of explanation, and not the abandonment of one for the other, e.g. caste for class, or class for caste.

The lines of social stratification in India are so deep and variegated that their uniqueness often overwhelms the scholar. The temptation to abandon 'theory' (or general laws?) when it comes to social stratification in India is strong, but stronger still is the temptation to construct an 'Indian theory' of the social phenomenon. This Indian theory of social stratification, it is believed, would be faithful to the idiosyncracies of the Indian situation and would fully flesh out the wholeness of caste, linguistic and religious diversity in this country. Much as this 'territorial orientation' (Singh 1985 : 53) is attractive it has not yet yielded anything which has risen above the capriciousness of the author. There is good reason for this too. The advantage of theory is

not only that it attempts to explain and frame observations, but it also performs the vital function of helping us communicate our varied experiences. We must move from the particular to the general if we are to share our experiences meaningfully. What is more, we get a deeper insight into our own experiences as a result of such theoretical communication. Only a fool-hardy mountaineer would attempt to scale the Everest without learning from the experiences of other mountaineers who may have scaled other mountains. Theories presume concepts, and concepts by their very nature allow us to group and categorize manifold experiences. All theories, Indian and non-Indian, must utilize concepts, and all concepts ought to satisfy certain basic logical principles if they are to be of any theoretical use. The difficulty, it seems to me, is that one is not always very careful about what the principal concepts of the various theories of social stratification imply. This is probably why there is some discomfort in certain quarters with respect to the application of general theories of social stratification to the Indian condition.

It is for this reason that it was felt that it would be best to devote the following pages to a clarification of the concepts of 'hierarchy' and 'difference' as they are central to all theories of social stratification (see Appendices I, II, III, IV and Madan 1980). In addition, 'hierarchy' and 'difference' inform other commonly used concepts like caste, class and status, as we shall soon see. Once we realize the importance of the basic principles that govern these terms our usage of them will be more sophisticated, and our understanding of terms like caste, status, class, prestige, will become more amenable to rigorous theoretical treatment. No claim is being made at this point of the relative merits and demerits of the various general theories of social stratification, such as those of Marx, Weber, functionalism, or culturology. What we wish to underline is that a clarity of the key concepts, namely, hierarchy and difference, will help us in our individual theoretical drives.

Hierarchy and Differences : The Key Concepts

Before we settle down to a close scrutiny of the logical properties of the concepts of *hierarchy* and *difference*, we should spend a little while in carefully going over the more general term *stratification* itself, and what it implies.

Stratification spontaneously signifies a multi-layered phenomenon, much like the earth's crust (Béteille 1977: 129). The point to remember in this connection is that the geological metaphor can be misleading in

the case of social stratification in so much as it might figuratively persuade one to believe that stratification always implies layers that are vertically or hierarchically arranged. For a true understanding of stratification we should be able to conceptually isolate it from hierarchy, as the latter is but one of the manifestations of the former.

The various layers that stratification spontaneously signifies do not imply unconditional differentiation. The differentiation is always on the basis of a criterion, or a set of criteria. Stratification therefore implies a common axis (or axes) that straddles the differences. Quite unlike geology again, social stratification does not manifest itself readily or 'naturally' to the naked eye. A deliberate act is required on the part of the observer or analyst to unite certain kinds of differences in order to construct a particular system of stratification. In discussing any system of social stratification we acknowledge an overarching commonality (or similarity) which like a thread links the manifest differences together. Social stratification is not like distinguishing between cabbages and kings: it does not group disparate entities without a clearly stated criterion or a declared set of criteria.

Commonality then exists as a pre-condition for all systems of stratification. If only differentiation were to be emphasized then how would systems of stratification emerge? How also could one justify the inclusion of certain elements and not of others. Cabbages, kings, ships and sealing wax do not after all make for any system. But when the population is stratified, say on the criterion of income, then we have a uniform criterion which can bring together sweepers, managers, white collar workers, and agricultural labourers into a single system of stratification where monetary income is the regnant principle. Likewise when we construct a social stratification of language groups the unifying basis is language and it does not matter if the language speaker is a sweeper or a college professor. Finally these sweepers, managers, white collar workers, and professors can also constitute a system of stratification based on the criterion of occupation. We are not really interested if these managers, sweepers, etc. are short or tall, married or unmarried. The only factor that interests us is that they all perform a manifest occupation. In each case then there is a presumption of a commonality that systematizes the differentiation of the various strata and binds the universe of a particular form of stratification.

(a) *Hierarchy* implies the regular ordering of a phenomenon on a continuous scale 'such that the elements of the whole are ranked in relation to the whole' (Dumont 1988: 66). Height, weight, income and even power (once it has been quantified) can be arranged in a hierarchy. Tall

and short people can be arranged in a hierarchy of height. You cannot position short or understand shortness unless you have a hierarchical scale that tells you what is tall and tallness. Hierarchy is but one form of social stratification and it certainly does not constitute the essence of social stratification. Indeed this is just the mistake that the famous sociologist Pitrim Sorokin made when he wrote:

Social stratification means the differentiation of a given population into *hierarchically* super-posed classes. It is manifested in the existence of upper and lower layers (the geological metaphor, D.G.). Its basis and very essence consists in an unequal distribution of rights and privileges... social power and influences among the members of a society (Sorokin 1961: 570, emphasis added).

Quite obviously for Sorokin, inequality and hierarchy were the stuff of social stratification. The geological model of layers too is quite evident. The various layers are always arranged vertically. If, for instance, we were to be discussing the stratification of power then those at the top have more power than those below them and so on till we come to the last layer that has the least power. The same can be said about wealth and examples proliferate.

But not all systems of stratification are hierarchical. Some are, but many are not. In the latter case 'difference' is valorized, and notions of hierarchy may or may not surface.

(b) *Differences* rather than hierarchy are dominant in some stratificatory systems. In other words, the constitutive elements of these differences are such that any attempt to see them hierarchically would do offence to the logical property of these very elements. The layers in this case are not arranged vertically or hierarchically, but horizontally or even separately. Such an arrangement can be easily illustrated in the case of language, religion or nationalities. It would be futile, and indeed capricious, if an attempt was made to hierarchize languages or religions or nationalities. In these cases it does not matter at all if the schematic representation of stratification places the different strata contiguously or separately, as long as they are horizontally positioned. India again is an appropriate place to demonstrate this variety of social stratification. The various languages that are spoken in India speak eloquently of an horizontal system of social stratification where differences are paramount. Secular India again provides an example of religious stratification where religions are not hierarchized or unequally privileged in law, but have the freedom to exist separately in full knowledge of their intrinsic differences.

A system of *social stratification* then implies differentiation among one or more features in such a fashion that they can be grouped along a common axis. But as stratification speaks not only of differentiation but differentiation grouped along such axes, the factor that is common indicates the nature of stratification. If it is language then we are delineating a stratification of language; if it is income, then we are hierarchizing a stratification of income; if it is religion then we are stratifying the different religions.

Hierarchy is only one kind of stratification where the strata are arranged vertically. This is appropriate only when this vertical arrangement is along a variable that can be measured on a continuous scale, as in the case of numbers. One cannot measure the proletariat, or the capitalist, but one can measure income. Likewise one cannot measure languages but one can measure the prestige accorded to a certain language in a certain region. It is possible then to have a hierarchy of income or of prestige, such that in one case different income earners and, in another, different language groups, can be placed along a continuous hierarchical scale. The crucial fact in all this is that the differences in prestige or in income should be either quantitative, or quantifiable (in terms of more or less of a certain property).

Difference is salient when social stratification is understood in a 'qualitative' sense. According to this scheme, there are incommensurable entities or units, that constitute different systems of stratification. In place of a continuous scale one encounters instead discrete categories. Thus in a stratification of classes, for example, different occupations may be listed without any scalar or hierarchical ranking; likewise in the stratification of religious groups one might mention the various religious denominations without imposing on them the uniformity of a scale based either on prestige, or on wealth, or on rationality. Once this is clear then there is little reason to believe with Sorokin that social stratification principally concerns itself with inequality and hierarchy.

To sum up then, social stratification is the ordering of social differences with the help of a set of criteria or just a single criterion (which is generally the case) which ties the differentiated strata into a system. Secondly, systems of social stratification just do not exist. They emerge only after a deliberate act on the part of the observer or analyst to opt for that common criterion or criteria. Thirdly, because these systems of social stratification are pivoted on mental constructions there is often a good deal of heart burning, house burning, and even wife burning on this account. Different people have different reckonings

of stratification, and when these systems do not match there is friction, often fire.

Differences and Inequality

We have already said that social stratification implies differentiation, but does this also mean that the strata thus differentiated are also unequal? It is important to reiterate that there can be separate classes of stratification, or strata, without there necessarily being any inequality (whether of wealth, power or prestige) between them. To bear this in mind is to guard against an oft adopted assumption that inequality pervades all forms of social differentiation. This then quite unthinkingly leads one to hierarchize systems of social stratification which are essentially horizontal. Unexamined prejudices thus find their way into academic exercises.

A social differentiation that separates without implying inequality is not always easy to appreciate. This is why an awareness of one's prejudices as well as those of others is so essential to the study of social stratification. Humankind, unfortunately, has not yet developed to a stage where we can all indulge in and celebrate our differences. Differences in language, religion, race or sex are differences that in themselves do not contain the property of inequality. This may however not be the popular understanding of these differences.

In the eyes of most people religions, languages, sexes, nationalities are all hierarchized—though it would be difficult to get an unambiguous statement of the criteria on the basis of which these hierarchies are constructed. In fact, a worthwhile question for a sociologist is to ask: Why is it that people tend to hierarchize horizontal differentiations whose logical property is equality?

Caste and class both bring to our minds inequality and hierarchy. And yet only certain operationalizations of these terms justify the implication of inequality. One can in fact talk of the various castes, both rural and urban, without directly implying inequality of caste, wealth or status. As a matter of fact, A.M. Shah in a recent study on the Varnias and Rajputs of Gujarat has treated each caste as a separate entity without making any statement on the nature of hierarchy that might pertain between them (Shah 1988: 3-29). Indeed on many occasions attempts to hierarchize different castes are fraught with ambiguous and contradictory postulates. Where can one place the Jat farmer of west UP? If one adopts the *varna* system then he would be placed quite low in the hierarchy, perhaps even deserving the contempt that

they are made of impure substances, or that the substances in them are less pure than those of another. Caste legends of Doms, Chamars, Chasa Dhoba, Kahars, all proclaim exalted origins (see Risley 1891) which of course the Brahminical texts vehemently deny. Yet each of these tales captures independently the essence of 'difference' between castes and are therefore logically of equal status. Gerald Berreman writes of an incident that portrays this tension over hierarchy accurately. During the course of his fieldwork he once related to some of his low caste respondents the orthodox hierarchy according to which the Brahmin was unequivocally on top. After listening carefully to Berreman these low caste respondents laughed, and one of them said, 'You have been talking with Brahmins' (Berreman pp. 84-92 in this volume).

If this is the case then any attempt to study the caste system in terms of a single clearly ranked hierarchy would obviously run into great difficulties. If we look at castes closely then we find that each maintains its own traditions and customs zealously and clearly distinguishes itself from others in its universe. Often this has been understood as a kind of 'caste patriotism'.¹ But to make matters difficult, caste is not just a separation between different castes. Each case of separation and valorization of differences is accompanied by a unique hierarchical ordering of castes. It is another matter that there are disagreements over this hierarchy, and that not all hierarchies can be socially enforced on a single scale, yet castes as such are never quite rested even after they have repulsed one another. Differentiation involves a cathective judgement regarding the elements of bodily purity and impurity, and this quite spontaneously suggests different, yet specific attempts to construct hierarchical rankings of castes. It should however be underlined that such hierarchies are idiosyncratic and *equally* valid.

We are thus forced to disagree with Dumont in so much as he posits

¹ This caste patriotism differs from self-identification on racial grounds by the fact that as one goes down to the finer and lower order divisions within a caste till one finally comes to the level of the endogamous *jati*, one continually finds a proliferation of differences all the way. Thus the maintenance of the first order division such as of the Vania, or the Brahmin, hardly exhausts the plentitude of other distinguishing markers that exist at lower levels. Thus one cannot say that endogamous *jatis* are segmented groups of the first order caste rankings. These *jatis* are not simply smaller segments of the bigger whole (see Dumont 1988 ; 42).

Race identity, on the other hand, moves in the opposite direction. The passion with which one identifies first order divisions like 'white' or 'black' is far greater than if the white and blacks were seen at lower and more disaggregated levels. The significance of being a white is far greater in South Africa than being a white of Dutch, German or English origin (for other views on this subject see Dumont 1988 ; 247-66).

a single hierarchy for understanding and explaining the caste system. In this true hierarchy the Brahmins are unanimously at the top and the Untouchables without dissension are at the bottom. The hierarchy is therefore a ritual hierarchy (and that is why it is 'true', says Dumont) which is dependent upon a state of mind and is not influenced by secular forces of economics and politics (see Dumont 1988: 19, 34, 66; Madan, 1970: 1-13). In our opinion such unanimity over the Brahminic hierarchy does not really exist; and the reason for this lack of consensus is remarkably simple. As castes are different and separate it is but a logical corollary that they should also hierarchize differently and separately.²

Notwithstanding our disagreement with Dumont it is incontrovertible however that Dumont introduced, perhaps for the first time in sociology and social anthropology, a technical understanding of the concept of hierarchy. True hierarchies, Dumont clarifies, 'are ranked in relation to the whole' (Dumont 1988: 66), with the added proviso that 'that which encompasses is more important than that which is encompassed' (Dumont 1988: 76). Thus it is clear that hierarchies suggest an overall unity such that the differentiated strata within the hierarchy are encompassed by the defining criterion of the system. This is why he advised, contra Bouglé, that to understand the caste system it was all important to grasp the principle of the *true hierarchy* and not wander among *differences* (Dumont 1988: xlvi, 43). It is perhaps because Dumont did not pay attention to the active principle of differences in the caste system that the Hindu caste order is presented as one without internal tension and dynamism, and the Hindu person as an archetypal representative of the species, *Homo Hierarchicus* (see also Desai 1988 : 49).

One might, at this stage, ask the question whether hierarchy comes before differences or differences before hierarchy (see Desai *ibid.*: 42)? There are good grounds to dodge the question but it would be more forthright to suggest that the existence of different hierarchies encourages one to take the position that differences dominate the articulation of a hierarchy in the caste system. Those hierarchies that are socially enforced on a general scale do not subsume the number

²Gerald Berreman's works are most instructive on this account. In recent times Berreman has time and again emphasized the fact that different castes have different evaluations of the caste hierarchy. It is unfortunate that Berreman's views are not as well known in India as Dumont's ideas are (see Berreman 1963 : 214-15, 222-3; 1979 : 77-80).

that exist in an inverted form in the more closeted observances and beliefs of the subjugated castes. The ideological motivation to Sanskritize does not appear only when the hitherto subordinated castes have either money or power to fancifully conjure another hierarchy. The other hierarchy is always there waiting for a propitious moment to extravert itself generally over the entire society.

Hierarchy and Difference in Class

The importance of distinguishing between hierarchy and difference can be exemplified with reference to the concept of class as well. Like caste, the concept of class finds its way into a large number of theoretical formulations of social stratification. Not always is it made clear whether it is being used in a hierarchical sense or in the sense of a horizontally differentiated and separate stratum. Most often any mention of class stratification presumes a hierarchical ordering though the concept is not logically limited to such operationalizations alone.

Class refers to a system of stratification that is economic in character. We are all familiar with terms like upper class, middle class and lower class; or, rich, middle and poor farmer. Sometimes these terms can be increased depending upon how fine one would like the categories to be. Therefore, it is often the case that one separates the upper middle class from the middle class or the lower middle class, and so on. There is no analytical problem in adding to the numbers of strata thus, because they are all being read off a hierarchical scale. Therefore we can have a class category depending upon the criterion of land, or one depending on the variable of money, or one on marketable yield, or one on disposable income. The important thing is that all of these criteria are convertible directly into money and that is why in class stratifications money or wealth is always central.

In spite of the matter appearing so simple one must exercise a number of precautions when using these terms. First, it ought to be realized that the cut-off points on a hierarchical scale which signify strata like upper class, upper middle class, middle class, lower middle class, lower class, and so on are essentially arbitrary. At what point the lower middle class becomes a lower class depends on considerations not imminent in the hierarchy. That is why it is important to remember that cut-off points on the hierarchy are justified on the basis of cohort factors which do not figure in the hierarchy itself, but are employed by the analyst to justify the demarcations for the purposes of a specific analysis (see also Singh 1977: 21-2). For each analysis therefore the

cohort factors justifying the demarcations in the hierarchy will differ. For this reason agrarian classifications which use such strata, as 0-5 acres, 6-10 acres, 11-15 acres, 16 acres and above, have to be revaluated with every fresh analysis. The problem in many cases is that these classifications are often seen as absolute in themselves, thus committing the analyst to elementary errors of reification. In one area a person with 5 acres may be an impoverished and marginal peasant, but elsewhere a farmer with 5 acres may be a prosperous member of the yeomanry.

This leads us to the second point of caution while employing strata that eponymously signify a hierarchical scale. The middle peasant, or the middle class, refers quite obviously to a stratum which is in the middle of the hierarchy of land and wealth respectively. But the manner in which these terms have been used and have gained salience urges us to construct a much fuller picture than the flat one-dimensional one that is read off a hierarchical scale. The understanding of the term middle peasant has attained a certain analytical status because its first approximation as one belonging in the middle of the land hierarchy has been abundantly superimposed by a host of other characteristics which are well outside the scope of the criterion that defined the land hierarchy. Some of the factors that give the concept of the middle peasant its analytical leverage in contemporary literature are ideological innocence, thriftiness, the employment of family labour, negligible interactions with the market, production for consumption, and so forth. The middle class too is often conceptualized in a similar manner. The attribute of cultural pretension, or the propensity for urban occupations are not features of the income hierarchy on which the concept of the middle class may receive its initial validation. Income or land ownership then become only one of the many characteristics by which such classes are understood. But as many of their other features cannot be merged into a single hierarchy, these strata gain much of their salience from their other attributes, namely, those that signify 'difference'. Even when certain features can be hierarchized, such as the employment of family labour, in the case of the middle peasant, the change in quantity on the continuum is regarded as so significant that when the peasant employs hired labour in the main he undergoes a qualitative transformation. In keeping with this qualitative transformation other attributes peculiar to the rich peasantry, such as entrepreneurship, urban preferences, ideological aggression, and so on become critical cohort factors—some of these are not amenable to hierarchization, and those which are call out to other hierarchies based

on different criteria. One should then, with a little care, be able to distinguish between pure hierarchical strata, and those which are eponymously so but depend in addition on attributes of difference.

While we have so far discussed hierarchical strata based on a single hierarchy, the same principal obtains even when a composite index is made up of different variables which have been quantitatively operationalized. In other words the aim of fashioning such composite indices is to arrive at one hierarchical measure. In the formulation of the indices of Socio-Economic Status (SES), education, occupation, prestige, income were first hierarchized and then merged together. Thus though each strata in the hierarchy have a variety of attributes they are visualized as being causally linked. For instance, Yogendra Singh and B. Kuppaswamy write:

Education has been considered to be a deciding factor of one's occupation, occupation an important intervening variable in the translation of educational advantage into income advantage, and the income a positive factor in deciding one's social prestige which, in turn, influences the educational level of the succeeding generation and possibly of the same also (quoted in Singh 1977: 21).

The differences are here *merged* and united reinforcing thus the single criterion hierarchies. Qualitative differences between the different variables that go into the making of SES, like composite indices, are deliberately sublated in order that these indices be quantifiable and obey the principle of hierarchy.

Hierarchy and Differences in Order and Conflict

Rarely do social classes present themselves simply as clusters around a continuous hierarchy. Life styles, beliefs, family size, etc., come in to characterize, almost uniquely, strata which, in the first quick look, may be considered to belong to the continuous hierarchy alone. Distinguishing between classes on the hierarchy from those that may only be reminiscent of it has other advantages too. It predisposes us, for instance, to anticipate the different analytical consequences that follow when one uses them especially with reference to conflict, continuity, order and change. If hierarchy alone is emphasized then there is little scope for allowing for change, conflict and dissension. In a hierarchy, as we know with the help of Dumont, 'that which encompasses is more important than that which is encompassed' (Dumont 1988: 76). Classes

understood simply in terms of their hierarchical placement cannot be utilized analytically for the study of change or class conflict. The principle of the true hierarchy, namely, that of encompassment undermines the potentialities of conflict if it does not negate them altogether. Hierarchy with its principle of encompassment signifies order and conformity. When one makes a hierarchy of wealth, or of power, or of prestige, then in each case continuity, conformity, order and objectifiable acquiescence to the hierarchy are valorized. Even multiple SES indices conform to this logical rule. While they help us make synchronic comparison, they are 'essentially static' (Singh 1988 : 23-4).

In order to understand the dimensions of conflict within the framework of social stratification it is essential to realize that conflict and tension can only be examined with the aid of concepts which do not owe complete allegiance to a hierarchical order but which have significant diacritical features of their own. While the manager, the superintendent, the white collar worker, and the dirty white collar worker, may be placed in a hierarchy within an organization, yet, if one is to understand organization tension and conflict then, these very classes must step out of their one dimensional profile in the hierarchy and assume a more qualitatively rounded presence. This is a logical requirement. As the hierarchy emphasizes unity and conformity, therefore any attempt to go beyond this level will necessitate an absorption of characteristics outside the criterion of the hierarchy or, in other words, attention must be paid to the multiple features that spell differences. With differences comes the notion of equality. Thus though the hierarchy may spell out unambiguously the inequality within the system we are still within an interiority whose sovereignty cannot be undermined without bringing in 'differences' from without. Thus though a manager remains a manager, a worker remains a worker, and a bobbin boy remains a bobbin boy, yet in an industrial dispute an alternative dimension comes into play. Now there is scope to, and room enough for, protest, agitation, or strike, for the hierarchically subordinated seek *equality* at other levels through the medium of differences. Political commitment, world views, aesthetic tastes and ethical values, are some of the differences that come into focus that separate the working class from the managers. For any agitation to take place in a hierarchically ordered organization it is an unconditional necessity that the dimension of 'differences' become salient.

In the case of castes, too, if there is a single true hierarchy (as Dumont posits) then that logically forecloses the possibility of conflict within the system. This is because the caste hierarchy, like all hierarchies,

inheres in the relation between that which encompasses and that which is encompassed. Caste conflicts and caste mobility occur because there are full-fledged *differences* between castes. Because of these differences, as we said before, alternative hierarchies, which are logically of equal status, arise. And as Dumont said correctly in another context, conflict arises only among equals (Dumont 1972). But Dumont's context was restricted to the rivalry for supremacy in village factions and caste *panchayats*. Dumont allows for conflict in these limited areas such as the caste *panchayat* because the members of a caste *panchayat*, or of a dominant caste, belong to the same caste and hence are equals. This led to 'plurality' of power (Dumont 1988 : 164, 182-3). Once again, we believe, Dumont is logically correct but is empirically too restrictive. His mistake in this case is that he is restricting the play of equality far too strictly. Conflicts arise on a far more general scale in caste societies because of the existence of multiple caste hierarchies, which are all separate and 'equal' and support their positions through their own caste ideologies.

While such a position is initially perhaps a little difficult to accept with reference to caste and class, a fidelity to the logical requirements of the terms, hierarchy and difference, help us see the matter somewhat freed from our reigning prejudices. As we all, researchers and respondents alike, live in stratified societies, prejudices of one kind or the other are bound to exist even within the most self-conscious amongst us. This is why it is useful to look at the logical requirements of the key concepts of social stratification, namely those of hierarchy and difference, and then examine how these concepts imbue the more empirically determined concepts like caste and class.

Conclusion : Hierarchy and Difference in Weber and Marx

Hierarchy and difference not only add to our understanding of concepts like caste and class but also help us to get a deeper reading of the various received theories of social stratification. Not always have the authors, or the exegetes of these theories, spelt out the logical implications of their concepts such that it would further our appreciation of the basic principles of social stratification.

Weber's formulation of the three axes of stratification, namely, class, status, and party, has many interesting possibilities from our point of view (see Appendix III). Of the three, 'status' received far greater attention, for Weber was always keen to delineate the alternative ways by which men gave meaning to their different life styles. But for Weber

each of these axes revolved around a single variable. Class was determined by reward in the market place;³ status centred around the concept of social prestige; and the crucial variable behind the party was power. As can easily be seen, rewards, prestige and power can be hierarchized and measured along univariate axes and this is probably why Weber despaired that all changes were only superficial. The only change that he foresaw with great trepidation and heightened distaste was the further consolidation of the principle of hierarchy in bureaucracies that dominated every aspect of society. For this reason he argued for the persistence of the democratic system for when it decides among various demagogues there is a fleeting moment during which bureaucracy is temporarily checked. Even such ephemeral correctives were welcomed by Weber as the scene was otherwise too bleak. The fact that Weber saw no alternatives to the present may explain why he should be the leading figure with a large number of generally conservative behavioural scientists of today. This is no small irony for unlike many later Weberians the master himself never glorified the present but reviled instead the 'iron cage' in which modern European societies were trapped (see Weber 1948 : 120-5; see also Loewenstein 1966 : 24-5).

In Weber's understanding of status group there lies a great potentiality for emphasizing differences. But as we just mentioned, Weber himself chose to unite these divergences in the hierarchy of prestige. For this reason caste was seen by him as a case of closed status groups (Weber 1958 : 39) and differences within the caste system were thus unfortunately sublated. In his understanding of caste perhaps Weber was not to blame, for such has been the power of popular conception on caste, that even today hierarchy is often emphasized over all else in the understanding of this unique Indian system of stratification.

This is not to suggest that Weber saw no 'difference' at all. But in Weber's understanding of difference, such as in his typology of world religions, the different religions are portrayed as unique totalities quite independent of one another. For instance, the world affirming religions exist quite independently of the world abnegating religions. This is quite different from the manner in which different classes are dialectically related in Marx's works. Change impulses exist in Marx because, with the exception of Marx's distinction between literate and pre-literate societies, differences are integrally related and not uniquely isolated.

³ Dumont rightly observes that for Weber 'all buyers and all sellers are as such identical' (Dumont 1988 : 105; see also Parkin 1982 : 93).

To refine then what has been said earlier, it is not just 'differences', but linked (or related) 'differences' that allow for an appreciation of the forces of social change and for a more dynamic frame of reference. Marx too accepted the primacy of hierarchy in the caste system, for which reason he was compelled to suspend the logic of historical materialism when it came to India. Marx has numerous passages to this effect where he talks of an unchanging India trapped timelessly by superstition and caste dogma till such time as it was shaken by British colonialism (see in particular Marx and Engels 1959: 15-18, 31, 34). This tradition in Marxist thinking still remains a vital strain with many (see for a good review treatment, Hindess and Hirst 1975).

Quite in contrast to his description of India, Marx saw great potentialities for change in all class societies. *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* quite clearly states on the first page that class societies are coterminous with literate societies where the first distinctions were made between manual and mental labour (Marx and Engels 1969: 108-9). India then should have also been examined as a class society replete with the potentialities of historical materialism. Even so, Marx, persuaded by Orientalist literature, quite uncharacteristically chose to view pre-British India in the main as a society still outside the process of history.

To return to the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* we see two types of classes, and not just two classes, as it is popularly believed. The first type of classes are the so-called social classes, like freeman, journeyman, apprentice, and guildmaster. The second type of classes are the analytical classes, such as the bourgeois and the proletariat, whose dialectically contradictory relationship defines and constrains specific social epochs and also shapes social change. But the social classes of the first type are descriptive classes and historical change does not hinge on them. In the Middle Ages there existed 'subordinate gradations' (ibid.: 109) beginning at the top with the feudal lord, who was followed by vassals, guildmaster, journeyman, apprentices and serfs. But such 'gradations' (hierarchy?) were of little use to Marx in his formulation of the laws of motion in society. In order to get the laws of motion, the contradictions (differences in their extreme form) between the determinate classes in society (or classes of the second type) were of critical importance and as such had to be unearthed for each specific social formation. In feudal societies, Marx contended, the basic classes in contradiction were the classes of the feudal lord and serf; and in capitalist society the contradiction was between the bourgeois class and the proletariat (ibid.). All this was packed in the first two pages of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.



The fact that Marx spent very little time on hierarchical gradations led him to undermine the aspects of order, continuity and stability in class societies. But this again was a logical denouement for he understood classes in terms of contradictions, i.e. in terms of extreme mutual 'differences', such that the interest of the two determinate classes in opposition would always remain irreconcilable. There is just no question of the encompassing and the encompassed being applicable here. These irreconcilable differences can only be overcome by a qualitative transformation of society as a whole. Wesolowski is thus wide off the mark when he attributes to Marx a hierarchical understanding of these very basic classes. According to Wesolowski (1969 : 128),

The bourgeoisie enjoy a higher income, a higher level of education and higher prestige. The workers have a low income, a low level of income and low prestige. The petit-bourgeoisie have an intermediate income, enjoy medium prestige and their level of education is higher than that of the bourgeoisie.

To mistake Marx's clear postulation of class contradiction as a species of strata continuum again demonstrates that the sociologists of social stratification quite uncritically tend to assume that all forms of stratification must necessarily be hierarchical in character. This was the mistake that we mentioned elsewhere in this paper that Pitrim Sorokin committed and is repeated again as we just saw by Wesolowski (see also Fried 1967 : 52). Perhaps a conscious awareness of the logical properties of *hierarchy* and *difference* will pre-empt such errors in the future and allow for a more systematic exposition of the basic principles that underpin the sources of continuity and change in diverse systems of social stratification.