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Untouchables and the caste system: a Tamil case study

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The Untouchable castes make up about one-seventh of the population of India. In rural areas, particularly in the south (with the exception of Kerala), the Untouchables live in separate hamlets, spatially segregated from the higher castes. Ritually, they are still, in most places, denied access to the village priests—both Brahmin and non-Brahmin—to village temples, and to certain village service castes. Socially, they rank at the bottom of local caste hierarchies; occupationally, they perform what Gough (1959) terms the most 'onerous' tasks in the village economic system. Their ritual occupations remain the traditional ones in most of Tamil Nadu—drumming, scavenging dead cattle, and (in some areas) guarding the village boundaries at night. And their economic status is generally—but not invariably—commensurate with their low social and ritual status.

Given these conditions, it is reasonable to predict that Untouchables resent their social position, which they do. A more fundamental question is, is it *only* their position which they resent, or is it the whole system? The ubiquitous Untouchable origin myth—that Untouchables originally were Brahmins or Kshatriyas, who fell due to an unfortunate accident—seems to assert, among other things, that it is not the system itself which the Untouchables dislike (the myth does not even question the system); they really ought to be Brahmins or Kshatriyas, except they were cheated out of their birthright. Berreman (1963) makes what might be called the minimal argument here, that Untouchables or low castes in general accept the caste system

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but not their position in it. He argues this in two ways. First, 'all castes are so imbued with the value of hierarchy that no one wants to associate with those it considers inferior' and second, given this value, the gain of upward mobility is greater than that of social equality, since the latter ends the superiority of any caste, no matter how low, to at least one other caste (the manner in which no caste need take a position at the very bottom of the system will be discussed below), while upward mobility promises increased superiority (Berreman 1963 : 224). The Untouchables would like to change their position, in other words, but this change can occur only in the context of an unchanging and unquestioned hierarchical social system.

Interestingly, the more extreme argument—that Untouchables also in some way oppose or reject the caste system itself—is also articulated by Berreman. In a critique of Dumont (1970), Berreman (1971 : 16-23) asserts that 'two thousand years of struggle to escape the oppression of their status by those the caste system deprives cannot be dismissed [by Dumont] . . . ' and 'any hierarchy, like any equalitarian system, is opposed by those who see its effect upon themselves as disadvantageous, no matter how loudly or piously it is advocated by those who benefit from it'. He further maintains that Dumont's consensual model of caste does not check out with rural Untouchables, that when he tested it with his low caste informants in an isolated Himalayan village, 'they laughed', and one of them said, 'you have been talking with Brahmins'.

Berreman here again is making two claims. One is that, not only have Untouchables, under the impact of twentieth-century social reform movements, come to oppose caste, but that they have for thousands of years; their opposition is inherent in their position. The second is that, in some way not specified by Berreman, the Untouchables reject the model of social life which is the basis of Dumont's characterization of Indian society—or that they do not recognize it as their own form of social life.

If Untouchables reject the high caste model, however, the question becomes, what *is* their model of social life? Berreman does not address the problem, but other anthropologists have. Gough, though she does not argue the point systematically, provides in her notes on the Untouchable Pallars of Tanjore, Tamil Nadu, a number of sympathetic hints of a differential value system among the Untouchables. She refers to Pallar scepticism about the Brahminic notions of karma, dharma and transmigration, to their strong group solidarity politically, to their 'fanatical emphasis on equality' (Gough 1960 : 44), to an openness, expressiveness, and willingness to express aggression not found among the higher castes, Brahmins in particular (Gough 1956).

Cohn also argues 'difference' in his study of the Untouchable Camars of Uttar Pradesh, but here in the frame of a Great Tradition/Little

Tradition model. He sees the Camars as the carriers of a pre-Aryan, non-Brahmanical religious system, and argues that cultural differences traditionally derived from the Camars spatial and social separation from village religion and culture (Cohn 1954). He further outlines greater intra-caste solidarity among the Camars than is found with the dominant Thakurs, but ties this particular difference to a recent development, to a response to breakdowns in the older individualized jajmani ties between Camar and Thakur families (Cohn 1955).

Cohn's analysis centres on a series of unsuccessful attempts by the Camars to raise their status by Sanskritization, attempts which amount to an effort on the part of the Camars to minimize their cultural differences vis-a-vis the higher castes. Miller, writing of the Untouchable Mahars of Maharashtra, Ambedkar's caste of origin, outlines a reverse process. Miller, in fact, makes the strongest claim by any anthropologist for the existence of a separate Untouchable subculture, and a subculture which is expressive of some degree of Untouchable rebellion against caste. The Mahars, he writes, 'have been building a tradition which can hardly be called [taking issue with Singer's approach] "a distinctive variant of *the* Great Tradition cognate to those of the four major varnas of Hindu society" '(Singer 1958 : 194). Factors in this separate Mahar tradition, according to Miller, include denial of Brahmin supremacy and of Vedic gods, emphasis on militancy, on bhakti—on 'emotionalism [as] opposed to ritualism; [on] escape *from* the system [as] opposed to movement *within* the system' (Miller 1966 : 26, 28, *passim*).

Miller's position as stated is difficult to evaluate, since he gives us no data on Mahar social structure or behaviour, on how their 'escape from the system' is in fact working out. As for the specific distinctive features of the Mahar's 'tradition-rejection', bhakti is certainly a part of the great tradition, and militancy is the core, if we are to believe the *Bhagavad Gita*, of the Kshatriya dharma. Further, if we say that any group which rejects the authority of Brahmins is outside the caste system, we must also include most of the artisan castes of the south in this rebellion; non-worship of Vedic high gods similarly eliminates vast numbers of non-Brahmin castes.

We are still left with Berreman's statement that the Untouchables of his village did not recognize, or accept, Dumont's characterization of Indian society. Let us refine the question by asserting, for the basis of argument, that Dumont's model can be simplified to include two main dimensions : sociologically, a social structure in which hierarchy or rank are important principles; and culturally, in South India at least, definition of status in terms of relative purity and impurity. Then Berreman's maximal position suggests that, however the Untouchables are forced to act toward the higher castes, among themselves—if they are truly, in some fundamental way, opposed to the system as a whole—they must behave in a differential fashion. They must possess

a distinctive subculture, opposed in significant ways to the culture of the high castes. And this subculture and subsystem, more exactly, might be expected to place less emphasis on hierarchy and on the cultural principles of purity and pollution than the model of the higher castes.

* * *

This question—the possible existence of a distinctive Untouchable subculture—was the focus of my fieldwork in rural Tamil Nadu. I soon discovered that, once I made my detachment from the local village dominant castes clear, most Untouchables were willing to articulate anti-caste sentiments with reference to the higher castes. How their own social structure functioned, however, the operational values within their own community, was a different matter.

The village studied (*kiraamam* in Tamil, translated 'village' here) is a large one, population about 1,500, 50 miles south of Madras city in southern Chingleput. It consists of two main living spaces, the village or main caste settlement (*uur* in Tamil) and a separate Untouchable colony (*cheri* in most parts of Tamil Nadu; in Chingleput, *kooloni*, from the English word 'colony'). About 30 per cent of the population is Scheduled Caste, comprising four castes who live outside the village: the *Valluvar Pandarams*, the Harijans, the Harijan *Vannans*, and the *Chakkiliyans*.

The system of relations between these four Untouchable castes constitutes a partial replication of the system found among the 'touchable' castes. Highest ranking are the Valluvar Pandarams, five households of whom live on a separate street midway between the village and the colony. By both the villagers and the Untouchables, the Valluvar Pandarams are defined as 'Brahmins to the Harijans': they perform Harijan life-cycle rituals, and figure in the first day of the colony's goddess festival—in the purification of the goddess and the temple. They have no marriage relations with the Harijans, and refuse to take cooked food or water from them. They explicitly define themselves as more pure (*suttam*) than the Harijans (a definition which the Harijans accept), and they are proud and protective of their knowledge, which places them in a higher state (*aachiram*, cognate to 'ashram') than the Harijans.

Second in rank is the Harijan caste ('Harijan' is the group's own term of self-reference), a caste formerly called *Paraiyan*. The old caste name indicates the caste's traditional ritual duty: *parai*='drum'; *paraiyan*='drummer'. Members of the caste still perform for the marriages and funerals of non-Brahmin village castes, and drum during festivals of the village goddess, though they are excluded from worshipping her. The Harijans survive economically as field labourers, tenant farmers, and small landowners, but their work is distinguished terminologically from their traditional ritual duty: *veele*=

'individual occupation', while *toRil*='ritual duty'. And rank is still defined with reference to *toRil*, by both the Harijans and the villagers.

The Harijans total 81 households, and form the nucleus of the colony, which has its own temple to the goddess Mariyamman, a close copy of the village Mariyamman temple. The colony is bounded by a cactus hedge, and the exact line between the village and the colony is demarcated by a ritually significant boundary stone. Among themselves, the Harijans often refer to the colony as a 'village' (*uur*); it is their refuge, and traditionally they had the right to drive out any high caste intruder by force—especially a Brahmin who, in an interesting inversion of the order of purity and pollution, was treated as a source of pollution to the colony (cf. Beteille 1965 : 38 and Thurston 1909, 6 : 88 for descriptions of the custom; the interpretation is my own).[1]

The third separate Untouchable caste (or *jaadi*) is the Harijan Vannan, washermen for the Harijans. The Harijan Vannans live on a separate street on the far side of the colony, but within its boundaries. They comprise two main families, each serving half of the colony by right. They also perform important ritual acts in the Harijan life-cycle rituals, and play a drum associated with goddess possession. As far as I could determine, the functions of the Harijan Vannans toward the Harijans are identical to the village Vannans' ritual services to the higher castes. The Harijan Vannans rank unambiguously below the Harijans. Their lower status is explicitly related to their impure work, to handling impure (*tittu*) clothes—especially menstrual clothes—and to the fact that they stand in a service relationship to the Harijans. In return for their washing, they receive cooked food from the Harijan families they serve; the Harijans do not take cooked food or water from them. And they find their marriage partners only among the Harijan Vannas of other colonies.

Lowest ranking and most peripheral (with the exception of a wandering hunting caste, the *Kurivikarans*) are the Chakkiliyans, whose *toRil* is leatherwork. The three families here have made some attempt to establish mutual Untouchability toward the Harijans; they claim not to live in the colony, though they are on its far boundaries, and in the last generation they refused to take cooked food, raw food or water from the Harijans who reciprocated in the transactional standoff. The younger men in the Chakkiliyan families now take cooked food from the Harijans, however, and identify with the colony to the extent of worshipping the colony goddess during her yearly festival procession. Though even now, the Chakkiliyans themselves do not admit to a position at the very bottom of the local caste hierarchy, they are

[1] Descriptions mention the right of the Untouchables to chase the Brahmin out by beating him with leather sandals; and one mentions that after the Brahmin's intrusion, Untouchables would break their mud pots, a ritual act also performed during the period of maximum death pollution in the funeral ceremonies of many castes.

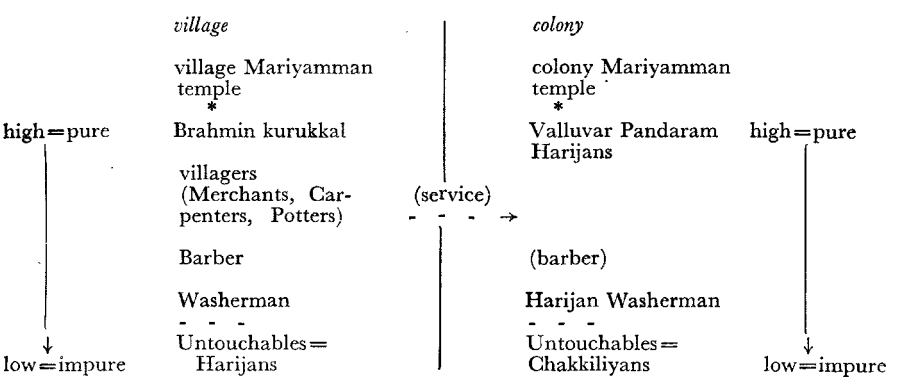
consistently placed below the Harijans in the opinion rankings of informants from all other castes. Attributes of their impurity centre on leatherworking: their contact with dead cattle is stronger and more intimate than that of the Harijans since they both work with, and sell, products of the cow's carcass.

Isomorphism between social structure in the colony and in the village follows the principle: those non-untouchable castes whose ritual services relate to purity and impurity refuse their services to the colony, while village service castes whose *toRil* does not involve the conferral of purity or the removal of impurity *do* serve the Harijans—the *Acaris* (carpenters here), the *Occans* (potters) and the *Chettis* (merchants). And it is just the services from which the Untouchables are excluded which are replicated in the colony. They are replicated in the same rank order as in the village, and according to the same cultural principles of relative purity and impurity. The Chakkiliyans even represent a group Untouchable to the Untouchables.[2] In this village, the only service caste missing from the equation is a barber caste to the Harijans (here, close Harijan relatives cut one another's hair), although I was told of the existence of a separate Harijan barber caste in other colonies, and one which apparently ranked between the Harijans and the Harijan Vannans.

Replication between village and colony can then be summed up:

FIGURE 1

REPLICATION OF SOCIAL RELATIONS: VILLAGE AND COLONY



[2] In areas where two large Untouchable castes exist, 'mutual Untouchability' is a stable standoff, with each caste inhabiting a separate colony, using separate wells, and employing a distinct set of ritual specialists. The structure permits each caste to claim that the other is at the very bottom of the social scale, to have at least one group over which it can claim social status. For Tanjore, see Gough 1960: 24; for a detailed description in Andhra Pradesh, see Reddy 1952: 204-15.

Rank is an important principle among the Untouchables at an even finer level. Within the large Harijan caste, there exist three ranked subdivisions, the *Talaiyaaris*, the *PaNNaikkaars*, and the *VeTTiyans*. These divisions are exhaustive; all 81 Harijan families fall into one of the three. Highest ranking are the Talaiyaaris who furnish two village servants; an assistant to the village munsif, and a watchman for the two largest landowning families in the village. The second-ranking PaNNaikkaars have no service in the village system, but among the Harijans, they traditionally provide the Harijan headmen, also called 'PaNNaikkaars', who settle disputes, preside at important rituals, and represent the colony in its relations with other colonies. The lowest-ranking VeTTiyans (also called, more pejoratively, *ToTTis*) perform the ritually impure tasks generally associated with Untouchable status: drumbeating, scavenging of dead cattle, and guarding the village boundaries at night. As is the case for caste definition, with these subdivisions ritual tasks are terminologically distinguished from daily work, and it is *toRil*, traditional duty, which is significant for status definition.

The Harijan term for the ranked subdivisions is *kottu* ('bunch') or *vakaiyara*. Within the high caste KonDakkaaTTi VeeLaalars (hereafter, 'KVs') of southwestern Chingleput, about 25 miles from this village, Barnett has found a comparable set of subdivisions, also called *vakaiyara*, which he translates as 'grade' (Barnett 1970). The term is useful, for the *vakaiyaras* in both castes are ranked, but they are distinct from subcastes of a single caste: they are not called *jaadi*, as are subcastes, they coexist more commonly in the same village or in the same region, and their boundaries are less strict than caste boundaries in terms of commensality and endogamy.

The basic principle of rank for the Harijan grades is, again, the relative purity of the *toRil* each performs. Although in the eyes of the villagers, all the Harijans are equally *tittu* or impure, the Harijans themselves see the work of the Talaiyaari as least impure, since the Talaiyaari works in the village; he is a village servant, which subordinates him to the village castes, but he does not handle the sources of impurity. The PaNNaikkaar's *toRil* is neutral as far as the village system goes, and honorific within the colony. And the VeTTiyan's *toRil* is distinctly impure.

Concommitantly, the Harijans among themselves speak of their own food habits differentially, here breaking down a single symbol of impurity—beef-eating—in three ways. The Talaiyaaris were non-beef-eating, according to both Talaiyaari and non-Talaiyaari informants, until a generation ago, and one of six families still eats only mutton and chicken. The PaNNaikkaars brag about the fact that, though they may eat beef, it is not predeceased beef. And the VeTTiyans eat the flesh of the scavenged dead cattle whose bodies are their 'right.'

In other ways, members of the higher grades see the lower grades as more

impure, referring, for example, to the VeTTiyans' general dirtiness, to their unclean way of preparing even their vegetarian food; and to their greater poverty (there was a very loose correlation between grade and economic standing among the Harijans, though it may have been valid only in this particular colony). Conversely, the VeTTiyans have a myth about their status vis-a-vis the other two grades similiar to the story told by the Harijans as a whole to explain their Untouchability. Just as the Harijans were originally the foremost people, who fell both due to an unlucky accident and due to a high caste trick, the VeTTiyans claim to have been the original people in the colony, with status and wealth based on the land they were given in return for their service to the village. But just as, with respect to a villager, a Harijan is simple and open and guileless, and therefore cheatable, the VeTTiyans had been honest and unsuspecting toward the Talaiyaaris and the PaNNaikkaars. They had, according to their story, unwisely loaned money to members of the other grades, which the other grades had invested in land and education (and never paid back). The Talaiyaaris and the PaNNaikkaars were then able to raise themselves, to become more pure (*suttam*) and to acquire more 'civilization' (*naagarigam*).

The difference in grades within the Harijan caste is further marked transactionally, though the transactional distinctions are not observed as uniformly between grades as between castes. Higher grade informants said they would not accept cooked food or water from VeTTiyans, though one informant said the distinctions were decreasing: that in his father's day, the VeTTiyans were fed, during a Talaiyari wedding feast, only if they sat at a distance from the household—which is no longer the case. In marriage, the ideal is to remain within the grade; most members of a grade in a single colony are parallel relatives terminologically, so this involves inter-colony marriage. There was considerable inter-*grade* marriage in the genealogies we collected, however, but the pattern was: (*i*) First preference: marriage between members of the same grade, from different colonies. (*ii*) Second preference: marriage across grade lines, but only with persons from other colonies. (*iii*) Third preference: marriage between members of different grades in the same colony.

Preference I represents an ideal of grade endogamy, articulated by many of our informants, particularly the Talaiyaaris and the PaNNaikkaars. Preference 2 suggests that, when grade endogamy is breached, it is more commonly done in such a way as to preserve status differentiation within a single colony at least—the colony is the important unit of hierarchy. And none of the cases in Preference 3 involves a marriage between the highest and lowest grades, between the Talaiyaaris and the VeTTiyans. A good number in this category represent an alliance between the two most 'progressive' families in the colony, between a PaNNaikkaar family headed by a man with

a job as road inspector in the local panchayat union, and a Talaiyaari family whose son teaches in a nearby Harijan Welfare school.

The parallel between grade organization among the Harijans and grades as they are found in the higher castes is not as exact as the replication of caste functions described above. Grades are not even found in all of the higher castes; Barnett's is the only detailed description in the literature, and only a few of the 'touchable' castes in this village would admit to the existence of *vakaiyaras*. More of them may have possessed grades than were willing to admit to them, however; informants seem unusually reticent on the matter of *vakaiyara*, and Barnett was able to get the KVs to describe them explicitly only after an intensive study of KV genealogies indicated the existence of systematic bilateral kindreds (Barnett, personal communication). One important point is that grade, which represents the operation of a principle of rank within even the local caste group, does not correlate with a caste's highness or lowness: the KVs are second only to the Brahmins, while the position of the Harijans need not be reiterated. If the Harijans are as opposed to caste as Berreman's extreme position indicates, this non-correlation is even more surprising than the replication of caste functions among the Untouchables: we might expect to find at least within their own *jaadi* a generalized egalitarian tendency among the Harijans.[3]

A second point about grade among the Harijans is that the cultural referents of rank are once again relative purity and impurity, as symbolized to *toRil*, eating habits, and other aspects of 'code for conduct'. KV grade rank is also defined culturally in terms of purity and impurity, but the emphasis differs symbolically: the crucial factor for the KVs is relative blood purity. This may make for greater flexibility in the Harijan grade system than among the KVs; while a KV male can change his blood substance only by being outcast, a Harijan may change grades by changing *toRil*. We found two cases of this; in both, a man had married into another grade in another colony, settled with his wife's family, and taken up his wife's father's *toRil*.

Harijan grades further differ from KV grades in being outward-oriented, in taking their definition from the village system of traditional duties. KV grades, on the other hand, are inward-oriented, deriving most of their meaning from relations within the KV caste.[4] The importance of KV grades is

[3] It should be mentioned that Gough's own material hints at a similar three-fold breakdown among the Untouchable Pallars, despite her interpretation of the group as a single solidary community. Her map of the Devandra Pallar *ceri* shows three separate streets ('upper', 'middle' and 'lower'), each street with its own headman; and, most importantly, with its own cremation ground. Separate cremation grounds in Tamil Nadu generally mark separate castes: differential purity in life seems to persist into death. Here I suggest that the three Pallar cremation grounds may mark a status differentiation within the Pallar caste (see Gough 1960: 19).

[4] My thanks to Steve Barnett for pointing out this particular distinction to me.

declining in accord with a decline in the importance of intra-caste dependence among the KVs. Also, among the KVs, the same grades do not exist from district to district; they are irrelevant, then, to the increasing number of inter-district marriages among the KVs. Among the Harijans, on the other hand, there is no district level organization—most marriages take place within five or ten miles—but the same set of grade distinctions is very widespread, taking its meaning as it does from a generalized village system found all over the area. An educated Harijan informant in Madras city, born in a colony in the Trichy area, 150 miles to the south, remembered the distinctions from his boyhood. Concommitantly, Harijan grades are a matter of common knowledge (as opposed to the secrecy of the KV grades); the Harijan grade structure was explained clearly and succinctly to me by a Talaiyaari informant on my second visit to the colony. Though there are indications that Harijan grade distinctions are more flexible than they were a generation ago (with more intermarriage and more interdining), they remain socially and functionally significant to a greater degree than do KV grades.

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An analysis of the internal social organization of a single large colony in rural Tamil Nadu, then, suggests that hierarchy, or a pervasive ranking principle, is as much a part of the effective values of the lowest castes—both at the level of inter-caste relations and of intra-caste, 'grade', relations—as it is for the middle range and high castes. And this hierarchical or ranking principle is defined as consistently in terms of purity and pollution at the bottom of the caste system as it is at other levels. Dumont's consensual model of caste, then, if I have simplified it properly, does check out among these Untouchables. The Berreman-Dumont issue may, like many of the issues in the anthropology of India, be partly a question of area : it is some distance from Berreman's Himalayan informants to the Untouchables of Tamil Nadu. Nevertheless, Berreman does use his informants to condemn Dumont's general view.[5]

Berreman's minimal position, that Untouchables accept the system but not necessarily their position in it, is perfectly in line with the material presented here.[6] On the other hand, his extreme position—based on the premise

[5] Marriott has pointed out (in a personal communication) that at least two other aspects of Dumont's model of caste may have been included in Berreman's unspecified representation to the low castes in his Himalayan village : denial of individualism, and separation of status from power. I hope it is clear that I am not dealing with these aspects of Dumont's position in the present paper.

[6] I do have some data suggesting 'acceptance' in the more classical sense : an older Harijan informant who sees his position as a matter of god-determined fate (*viidi*); and younger infor-

that 'any hierarchy . . . is opposed by those who see its effect on themselves as disadvantageous'—raises the question, is hierarchy *ipso facto* disadvantageous to the Harijans? Grade structure appears, if anything, more important to Harijans than to higher castes, and this is not difficult to explain if caste is viewed as a status game (and as a game played by a set of rules common to all castes, high and low—hierarchical ones). If we postulate that the arena of status competition for Harijans is simply a smaller one than for non-Harijans, the game is functional for both groups, and it may be more intense among the Harijans by reason of the compression of the arena. For the same reason that the lowest 'touchable' castes (barbers and washermen here) are most vocal in denigrating the Harijans—the Harijans are the only large group over whom they 'win' in status terms—the Talaiyaaris and the PaNNaikkaars take exaggerated pride in the degree to which they differ from the lowly VeTTiyans. Hence the importance of grades within the community.

There are signs that the ideas of Ambedkar and Gandhi are at least known in the colony—but the impact of the ideas remains slight. The Harijan Welfare schoolteacher had tried at one time to form an Ambedkar sangam among the Harijans, but it had quickly failed; and he himself continues to be a Hindu religiously. Buddhism never spread to the south of India, he explained, and since 'we must have some god to worship', he had gone on worshipping the Hindu gods, 'despite the horrors we have suffered'.

The road inspector, middle-aged man with experience in the old Congress Depressed Class League, was most articulate about the relation between a general anti-caste attitude and the internal social organization of the Untouchable castes. On our first meeting with him, he admitted to the existence of the grade divisions within the Harijans, but he claimed that there was no rank or status differentiation involved: 'We say to others, there is no difference between castes, that we should not be depressed. "God is one; caste is one". Therefore, we cannot have divisions among ourselves'.[7]

On longer acquaintance, however, this same informant proved perhaps most conscious of his grade-status of any single informant: he continually derogated the VeTTiyans as a group, he took pride in the marriage of women from his lineage into a Talaiyaari family (he was PaNNaikkaar), and he went so far as to divide the PaNNaikkaar grade itself into 'clean' and

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mants who are simply aware of the practical unlikelihood of doing much about their birth-given status within the village context.

[7] Dr Ann Foner, a sociologist specializing in stratification theory, has noted that part of the argument here—at least as it affects possibilities for social change—hinges on a postulate of consistency. That is, I am arguing that Untouchables cannot effectively oppose caste as a system if among themselves they behave according to the hierarchical values which they reject in the system as a whole. It is worth drawing attention to this assumption, and to the fact that the above informant formulated just this consistency principle.

'dirty' PaNNaikkaars, including his own relatives and a few other families (those with some landholdings) into the former category. This relatively well-educated and politically experienced Harijan provided my most striking object lesson in the difference between verbal expressions of an anti-caste attitude—an attitude Harijans are particularly willing to serve up to a westerner—and the values and attitudes which lie behind daily behaviour among Untouchables.

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