

Dumont, Louis. 1999 [1970]. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press

25 *Pure and impure*

25.1 *General view*. Here we propose to specify the nature of the opposition between pure and impure by successive approximations.^{25a} At first sight, two main questions will probably come to mind: why is this distinction applied to hereditary groups? And, if it accounts for the contrast between Brahmans and Untouchables, can it account equally for the division of society into a large number of groups, themselves sometimes extremely subdivided? We will not answer these questions directly but will confine ourselves to some remarks in relation to them. It is generally agreed that the opposition is manifested in some macroscopic form in the

contrast between the two extreme categories: Brahmans and Untouchables. The Brahmans, being in principle priests, occupy the supreme rank with respect to the whole set of castes. The Untouchables, as very impure servants, are segregated outside the villages proper, in distinct hamlets (or at least distinct quarters). The Untouchables may not use the same wells as the others (barring recent local relaxations), access to Hindu temples was forbidden them up to the Gandhian reform, and they suffer from numerous other disabilities. (It must be said that the situation has been somewhat modified since the Gandhian agitation, and that independent India has declared Untouchability illegal; this is an important step, but it cannot transform overnight the traditional situation which concerns us here.) The term 'Untouchable' to designate the category is English rather than indigenous: the notion is present, but in common usage these people are designated by the name of the particular caste to which they belong. Euphemisms are usually resorted to when the category is designated, the most recent, introduced by Gandhi, being 'Harijan', 'sons of Hari', that is, creatures of God (Vishnu).

Why, it may be asked, this separation of the Untouchables? May it be supposed, for example, that it is due to the nauseating smell of the skins they are accustomed to treat? Hygiene is often invoked to justify ideas about impurity. In reality, even though the notion may be found to contain hygienic associations, these cannot account for it, as it is a religious notion. I shall show in what follows that the immediate source of the notion is to be found in the temporary impurity which the Hindu of good caste contracts in relation to organic life. Starting from this, we shall see that it is specialization in impure tasks, in practice or in theory, which leads to the attribution of a massive and permanent impurity to some categories of people. Ancient literature confirms that temporary and permanent impurity are identical in nature. But one must not lose sight of the complementarity which exists between pure and impure, and also between the social groups in which these ideas are expressed. One can subsequently trace not only the multiple derivations of the notion, but also the multiplication of the criteria of distinction and the extreme portioning out, so to speak, of hierarchical status between a large number of groups. We will end by mentioning some variants and irregularities and by sketching a semantic comparison with our own notions.

25.2 *Temporary impurity and permanent impurity.* In large areas of the world, death, birth and other events in personal or family life are considered to harbour a danger which leads to the temporary seclusion of the affected persons, to prohibitions against contact, etc. Although the notion of impurity is lacking and although these dangerous situations are not distinguished from other situations, it is believed in Dobu, for example, that a transgression of the prohibition will lead to a skin disease; or again contact with mourners can be dangerous for the same reason as contact with the chief's head (Polynesia).^{25b} Not all traces of notions of this kind are absent from Catholicism. Thus Candlemas is the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin, and even recently the newly-delivered mother was actually excluded from the church for forty days, at the end of which she would present herself carrying a lighted candle and would be met at the church porch by the priest. In so far as the notion of impurity is present, the bath is the most widespread remedy for it. In India, persons affected by this kind of event are impure for a prescribed period, and Indians themselves identify this impurity with that of the Untouchables. Thus Professor P. V. Kane, the learned jurist to whom we owe that monumental work, the *History of the Dharmasāstra*, writes that a man's nearest relatives and his best friend become untouchable for him for a certain time as a result of these events (II, 1, p. 170).

If we compare more precisely what happens in the case of death among the Hindus with what happens in a tribe, we see first that among the Hindus the notion of impurity is distinct, different from the notion of danger which corresponds elsewhere to the sacred in general and not only to the impure. Then we notice another difference: elsewhere one gets rid of the danger of the situation, in one respect, by recourse to complementarity, which is conceived as instantaneous and reciprocal: I bury your dead, you bury mine. In India itself affinal relations are seen on occasion to undertake certain functions of the kind, but in general the principal functions are entrusted to specialists. As Hocart says, in the south of the country the barber is the funeral priest and thus burdened with impurity; in the whole of India except perhaps the Maratha country the washerman takes care of washing the soiled linen at times of birth and menstruation. In these cases the washerman and the barber are specialists in impurity, who, in virtue of their functions, find themselves living permanently in a state bordering

upon that which the people they serve enter temporarily: a state which these people get out of thanks to, among other things, a terminal bath. (It is true that these two specialists do not belong to the Untouchables proper.) Thus it is seen that, in the setting of the opposition between pure and impure, the religious division of labour goes hand in hand with the permanent attribution to certain professions of a certain level of impurity. From this it should not be inferred that the religious division of labour cannot arise in another setting. This is what Hocart has shown, though involuntarily, by comparing the caste system to the specialization of religious functions in Fiji. In Fiji, the system is centred on the chief, let us say the king, and the pure and the impure are not distinguished. In India, the king or his equivalent is indeed the main employer, but the Brahman, the priest, is superior to him, and correspondingly the pure and the impure are opposed. I have anticipated in order to show straight away how Hocart must be corrected on an important point.

Notice two further essential differences between the Indian and the tribal case. Elsewhere, the dangerous contact acts directly on the person involved, affecting his health for example, whereas with the Hindus it is a matter of impurity, that is, of fall in social status or risk of such a fall. This is quite different, although traces of the other conception can be found in India. Furthermore, in human relationships the relation between superiors (who are sacred elsewhere and pure in India) and inferiors is reversed: the tribal chief is taboo, i.e. dangerous for the common people, whereas the Brahman is vulnerable to pollution by an inferior.

25.3 *Historical data:* Normative literature, the literature of the *dharma* or religious law, has purification (*suddhi*) as one of its main themes, the impurity resulting from birth and death being specially designated *āśauca*. According to *Hārīta*, the purity he calls external is of three kinds, bearing on the family (*kula*), objects of everyday use (*artha*), and the body (*śarīra*). For the body, the main thing is the morning attention to hygiene culminating in the daily bath. According to Manu there are twelve secretions or impurities, including excrement, saliva, and the lowly fate reserved for the left hand (in Tamil the 'hand of filth'). Objects are distinguished by the greater or lesser ease of their purification (a bronze vessel is merely cleaned, an earthenware one replaced) and

their relative richness: silk is purer than cotton, gold than silver, than bronze, than copper. But above all one realizes that objects are not polluted simply by contact, but by the use to which they are put, by a sort of participation by the object, in being used, with the person. Thus nowadays a new garment or vessel can be received from anybody. It is said that his own bed, his garment, his wife, his child, his water-pot are pure from pollution for the person himself, but impure for others.^{25c}

Family impurity is the most important: it is that of birth (*sūtaka*) and above all death. Birth only lastingly affects the mother and the new-born child. Death affects the relations collectively and it is a social rather than a physical matter, since the impurity essentially affects not the people in whose house someone dies, but the relations of the deceased wherever they may be. Moreover the effect varies according to the degree of kinship. The strength of these ideas can be realized in the light of the reforms proposed by Kane to counteract what he regards as being nowadays anachronistic and troublesome excesses. He suggests what he considers a sufficient maximum for mourning, namely: ten days' mourning and impurity for the father, the mother, the son, the wife or the husband, the chief mourner (if he is not one of the above); three days for the other members of the joint family; for the rest it would suffice to take a bath on hearing of the death within a year.

Note some further prescriptions which are evidence to the same effect: a menstruating (or pre-pubertal) woman may not mount her husband's funeral pyre, she must wait for four days and the final bath (she would have to bathe in any case before burning herself alive). A marriage ceremony must be postponed if a fairly close death occurs during the preparations for it, or if the mother is menstruating. It is sometimes said that one should not come near the fire nor breathe on the fire with one's mouth if one is impure. A verse of *Manu* (II, 27) clearly shows the nature of impurity: 'The pollution of semen and of the womb [that is to say, birth] is effaced for the twice-born by the sacraments of pregnancy, birth, tonsure and initiation.' (The 'twice-born' are the members of the categories who are entitled to initiation, a second birth.) It can be seen that impurity corresponds to the organic aspect of man. Religion generally speaks in the name of universal order; but in this case, though unaware in this form of what it is doing, by

proscribing impurity it in fact sets up an opposition between religious and social man on the one hand, and nature on the other.

According to some authors, certain functions or professions involve absence of impurity, or immediate purification (*sadyah*, 'the same day'). Thus the king is never impure, as he must not be reduced to idleness even temporarily; thus again the Brahman student is affected only by the death of very close relatives. The same applies to priests who are performing a ritual, and sometimes to humbler workers, no doubt in virtue of the task in which they are engaged. The case of the king is striking. One sees here that the Indians are realistic whereas, we are told, Chinese civil servants retire for at least twenty-seven months after a bereavement (*Enc. of Rel. a Ethics s.v. Purification*).

How, according to the texts as well as custom, is impurity to be remedied? Through the bath, water is the great purificatory agent. Yet it must be noticed that its virtue has certain limitations: when the pollution is particularly intense, at the death of a near relative for example, one must wait for the period prescribed for the duration of mourning before taking the terminal bath. Further, not all baths are equally efficacious: most strictly a bath in running water, fully clothed, is required, and certain especially sacred waters, like the Ganges, have the maximum purificatory or in any case religious power. Mauss' statement may be verified: water acts not simply in accordance with a magical mechanism but by reason of the spiritual presences which it contains or represents. As Mauss said further, water in general 'separates' different states of purity: one sometimes bathes *before* encountering an impurity. Fire on the other hand has scarcely any direct purificatory value, though it has connected functions (ordeal, ritual). Shaving, especially shaving the whole head, accompanies purificatory baths, as at the end of mourning; on the other hand, the ban on shaving during mourning and in other circumstances is a mark of an ascetic performance; further, a child's head of hair is sometimes dedicated to a god. Apart from minor measures (bleeding the little finger, chewing a chilli, touching iron) and water, the main purifying agents are the five products of the cow (urine, dung, etc.). These purificatory procedures are also employed in the case of what may be called caste pollution: one bathes after the market or work, one is reintegrated into the caste by a ceremonial bath. Moreover, there

is an easy transition from purification to expiation (absorption of the products of the cow, bath in the Ganges).^{25d}

25.4 *Historical data (concluded)*. Thus the literature is explicit about impurity in personal life within a caste or social category – particularly that of the Brahmans. From this point of view, purification already appears as a perpetual necessity. The literature also shows the transition from this occasional or temporary impurity to the permanent impurity of certain human groups. The laws of Manu say (V, 85), 'When he has touched a *Caṇḍāla*, a menstruating woman, an outcaste, a woman who has just given birth, a corpse . . . he purifies himself by bathing.' Here the three occasional impurities are identified with that of the 'outcaste' and the *Caṇḍāla*, who is none other than the old prototype of the Untouchable. There is another list in the same book at III, 239, 'A *Caṇḍāla*, a domestic pig, a cock, a dog, a menstruating woman and a eunuch must not look at Brahmans while they are eating', and the following verse adds that the same people likewise render certain sorts of ritual ineffective. We shall see that a man who is eating is particularly vulnerable to impurity; moreover the animals mentioned feed on refuse and filth which they find in the village and its outskirts. Here again, functional characteristics are thus equated with individual events as sources of impurity, and different sorts of impurity are identified. (The case of the eunuch remains to be explained.) So we find that Manu said the same thing as Kane says at the present day.

If the laws of Manu are difficult to date precisely, at least it is admitted that no part of them is later than the third century AD whilst certain elements could be very much older. So it can be seen that specialization in impurity at least, if not the caste system such as exists these days, is recorded from the beginning of our era. In the same text the *Caṇḍāla* is relegated to cremation grounds and lives on men's refuse. The collection of *Jātaka*, or previous lives of the Buddha, a text descriptive rather than normative in character, is also hard to date but is certainly earlier than the earliest date of Manu. This text gives a very similar picture of the *Caṇḍāla*. A Brahman who meets him on his way says to him: 'Fly away, crow of ill-omen.' The daughters of a merchant and a chaplain who were playing near the town gate have the misfortune to catch sight of a *Caṇḍāla*; they wash their eyes and the unfortunate one

is beaten. Eating the left-overs of a *Caṇḍāla* results in exclusion for a Brahman, and a young Brahman who, suffering from hunger, shared the food of a *Caṇḍāla* goes off to die of despair in the forest. Another *Jātaka* shows that the king may not share the food of a daughter he has had by a slave. In all this it is clear, as R. Fick said long ago in his social exegesis of these texts, that the Brahmanic theory of pure and impure was not only in existence but was really applied in fact at least several centuries before the Christian era. These very clear facts are minimized when we are told that caste as we know it is more recent. This is true, but does not prevent the fundamental principles having been present for a long time.

In short, not only are the impurity of individual life and that of the Untouchable considered today as being of the same nature, but it was already so for the author of the Laws of Manu, and the *Jātakas* show that there was a very strong feeling of impurity among certain groups and that untouchability already existed to a considerable extent.

25.5 *Complementarity*. The above does not in the least mean that impurities of personal life are, in the world of caste, independent of caste pollution in their conception and elaboration. Quite the contrary: it is clear that the two are interdependent and it is at the least very probable that the development of caste must historically have been accompanied by the development of Brahmanic prescriptions relating to the impurities of organic life, whether personal or of the family. Thus one can observe a parallelism between the states which accompany the ceremonies of the ages of life, and even the main actions of everyday life, and caste ranking. A mourner not following the precepts and lacking the help of specialists would remain more or less untouchable. A menstruating woman may not cook for her family. Marriage on the contrary, the only *rite de passage*, it may be noted, which is not accompanied by any impurity, gives the impression, by the prestige which it radiates and many other traits, that in it the Hindu finds himself symbolically and temporarily raised from his condition and assimilated to the highest, that of prince or Brahman for a non-Brahman, that of god for a Brahman. In daily life, the long ceremony which the Brahman performs in the morning, and which combines cares of hygiene with prayer and the purificatory bath, is necessary for

him to be in some way reborn to his condition of the highest purity and to make him fit to have his meal. When he eats he is in an extremely vulnerable state, and even if everything takes place without mishap he rises from his meal less pure than he sat down. If he works away from home, as in these days, he takes care to have a bath when he returns.

It is clear that the impurity of the Untouchable is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahman. They must have been established together, or in any case have mutually reinforced each other, and we must get used to thinking of them together.^{25e} In particular, untouchability will not truly disappear until the purity of the Brahman is itself radically devalued; this is not always noticed. It is remarkable that the essential development of the opposition between pure and impure in this connection bears on the cow. Cattle and especially the cow are, as is well known, the objects of true veneration. It was not the same in the Veda although the cow was much revered; as is natural among a pastoral people, cattle were not killed without rhyme or reason, but sacrificed animals were eaten and, at least sometimes, cows were sacrificed. Among Hindus, on the contrary, even the involuntary killing of a cow is a very serious crime, and one can see a relation between the transformation thus shown and the progress of ideas of non-violence.^{25f} But there is also a social connection: the murder of a cow is assimilated to that of a Brahman, and we have seen that its products are powerful purificatory agents. Symmetrically, the Untouchables have the job of disposing of the dead cattle, of treating and working their skins, and this is unquestionably one of the main features of untouchability. It is noteworthy that in the Gangetic plain, for instance, by far the most numerous caste of Untouchables, which constitutes the greater part of the agricultural labour force, is that of the *Camār* or 'leather' people, while in the Tamil country the typical untouchable caste is that of the *paRaiyar* or 'those of the drum (*paRai*)' (from which we have 'pariah'), drum skins being of course impure, and the Untouchables consequently having the monopoly of village bands. Thus it is seen that the cow, the sort of half-animal, half-divine counterpart of the Brahman, effectively divides the highest from the lowest of men. Its sacred character has a social function. The development or the transformation of this character must historically have accompanied the genesis of Hindu society from Vedic society, a

genesis which is related to the functional generalization of the opposition of pure and impure.

There remains at least one remark to be made about the situation of the Untouchables. Seeing them physically rejected from the villages and obliged to perform ignominious tasks, one is tempted to regard them as outside religious society. Although the principle which distinguishes them is religious, the basis of the opposition, in other words what they have in common with other men, would have to be sought in another domain: it would be a matter of fact pure and simple, of economic and political fact if you like. This is not quite accurate, and here we must get used to a form of thought which is foreign to us. We have already noticed that the execution of impure tasks by some is necessary to the maintenance of purity for others. The two poles are equally necessary, although unequal. Ethnographic literature would provide spectacular confirmation of this especially in the south: in village ceremonies the participation of the Untouchables is required, as musicians or even as priests. The conclusion is that the actual society is a totality made up of two unequal but complementary parts. The beliefs about transmigration point in the same direction.²⁵⁸

25.6 *The multiplication of criteria and the segmentation of status.* We have until now studied the fundamental opposition in its main form inasmuch as it is exhibited in untouchability. Let us turn now to the second question raised at the beginning of this section: is it true that the opposition of the pure and the impure accounts not only for the segregation of the Untouchables but also for the fact that there is an almost indefinite number of distinct castes? Leaving until the next chapter the traditional division of society into four castes or *varna*, we shall exhibit two phenomena in parallel: the multiplication of the criteria of status, which all relate to the fundamental opposition, and the portioning out – we shall say by analogy the segmentation – of hierarchical status between a large number of groups.

We acknowledge that the elementary and universal foundation of impurity is in the organic aspects of human life and from this the impurity of certain specialists (washerman, barber in the case mentioned) is directly derived; in the veneration of the cow we have already encountered one criterion, which is evidently bound up with the distinction between pure and impure, but which is an

HOMO HIERARCHICUS

ancient creation of Indian society and which, we have seen, is at work in the condition of the Untouchable. A whole series of other criteria have appeared in the same manner. Thus, very likely under the pressure of the ethics of renunciation as found in Buddhism and especially Jainism, a vegetarian diet was adopted by the majority of Brahmans and, either directly or through their agency, came to prevail as a practice superior to a meat diet, that is, as a mark of purity opposed to a mark of impurity. Note that so far superiority and superior purity are identical; it is in this sense that, ideologically, distinction of purity is the foundation of status. The distinction in diets is very important: it corresponds to a great rift in society (but we shall see that it is sometimes counter-balanced by other factors). Moreover it is valuable for the classification of castes in yet another sense, for it is susceptible of segmentation: it is less impure to eat game than domestic pig, raised by lowly castes and fed on garbage, it is less impure to eat the meat of a herbivorous than a carnivorous animal, etc. Thus within the class of meat eaters numerous distinctions can be made.

Still other criteria are at work; Brahmans forbid divorce and the remarriage of widows, and they practise (or used to practise) infant marriage; on each of these points, castes which do not conform to the superior practice are considered inferior, and these are numerous. Should we say that this again is a question of purity? For the Brahmans the indissolubility of marriage has religious value, and the same holds in some measure for infant marriage (the girl must be pre-pubertal). It is by association with the Brahmans that these practices take on the colour of purity. I have only listed some absolute criteria from among those most current. We shall also encounter relative criteria: who accepts such-and-such a kind of food from the caste in question? Is it or is it not served by such-and-such a specialist?

Now let us analyse how a rank is attributed to a caste in relation to the neighbouring ones. In general a caste will be recognized as inferior to some and superior to others. To settle its rank, a certain number of criteria will be used, and it will be observed that at least two criteria are indispensable. For example, one can imagine the members of the caste saying: 'We are vegetarians, which places us above X, Y, Z, who eat meat; but we allow the remarriage of widows, which places us below A, B, C, who forbid

FROM SYSTEM TO STRUCTURE

it.' It must be noticed that each of these two elementary judgments has the effect of dividing the set of castes under consideration into two parts, respectively superior and inferior: to say 'we are vegetarians' is to unite oneself with all the vegetarian castes and oppose oneself to all the others. Consequently, the caste is ranked by effecting a series of dichotomies of this kind, two at the minimum (supposing there exists a strict linear order of castes): one dichotomy which separates it from what is beneath it, and another from what is above, each at the same time uniting it with the corresponding complement in each case.

So it can well be imagined that it is difficult to grade all the castes of a given area in a fixed hierarchical order even though the fundamental principle is beyond question and universal in its operation. The complication springs from the multiplicity of concrete criteria and from the necessity of evaluating them in relation to each other. Each group will try to manipulate this situation to its advantage but other groups may be of a different opinion. We will encounter this question again in connection with hierarchy. For the moment we have tried to establish three points: (1) in people's consciousness all the criteria of distinction appear as so many different forms of the same principle; (2) all permit the operation of an overall dichotomy of the society; (3) this is really the hierarchical principle, of which the linear order of castes from A to Z is in any case only a by-product.

In what follows we shall make use of the statement that each elementary judgment relating to status unites the caste with all those which share the same feature, while opposing it to all the others. It can be seen that a fundamental opposition which is conceived as the essence of a whole series of concrete distinctions really underlies the hierarchical order. As a corollary it can also be seen that if one supposes that there is a large number of groups to be classified, a considerable demand for concrete criteria results, since for the linear and unambiguous ordering of n groups, $n - 1$ criteria of distinction are required.

25.7 *Variants and anomalies.* After what has just been said it is not surprising to encounter regional differences and irregularities or anomalies. We have said that the barber owes his inferior rank in the south to his function as a funeral priest. And indeed, in the north, where he has not this function, he has a higher status,

HOMO HIERARCHICUS

appearing as a helper or servant of the Brahman in family ceremonies and serving as a messenger for auspicious events; a special priest officiates in the funeral rites, called by antiphrasis 'Mahabrahman' or great Brahman, who is in fact an Untouchable of a particular kind, inspiring such an aversion that care is taken not to have the slightest relation with him beyond the circumstance in which he is indispensable as representative of the deceased. To be precise, I have spoken of the north in general thinking particularly of Uttar Pradesh. Immediately to the east, in Bihar, the barber is said to be impure. Farther east in Bengal he is not (Dalton, p. 324), and one may presume that there is a corresponding difference in his functions. More generally there are notable differences in the intensity with which Untouchability is felt and codified. The south is much more traditional than the north, and it would even seem that it still feels religiously that which would often be only etiquette elsewhere (for example in Uttar Pradesh), but it is still necessary to make distinctions. Apart from the marginal regions where the Brahman is less solidly implanted (Bengal, Assam) it may be supposed that, prior to modern influences, Islam was influential. Thus in the Panjab, Untouchability is relatively weak: it is only food touched by sweepers which may not be eaten. Hindu families in Delhi would accept water from the leather flask of a Muslim porter (it was said that the water was purified by the air); in western Panjab, Hindus themselves would make use of such a container (O'Malley, *Indian Caste Customs*, p. 110). Moreover the use of leather for footwear would appear to have been more common in regions under Muslim influence, though neither the material nor the object in any other way lost its degrading character. Thus Blunt reports that in certain castes in Uttar Pradesh a transgressor incapable of paying a fine would place the shoes of the members of the assembly on his head, thus incurring a serious degradation (*Caste System*, p. 124). Note in passing that it is not properly a question of impurity here (for example, a bath would not be efficacious) but rather a question of a means of bringing about a fall in status – or only in prestige? – a more or less definitive opprobrium. Conversely, it is probable that the Jains have particularly contributed to the reinforcement of the requirement of separation from the organic world. Not only do they observe very long periods of pollution – forty days for birth, like the Hebrews and the Christians – but, at least for the monks,

the requirement of respect for life takes precedence over 'external' purity: the monk does not bathe so as not to kill 'the life of the water'.^{25h} Elsewhere there is the inopportune zeal of neophytes: thus the Raj Gonds, a tribe which very likely turned Hindu when it managed to establish kingdoms in the Deccan (around the fifteenth century), are reputed to wash the wood used for cooking (O'Malley, p. 103). Elsewhere again one encounters the raw material of the belief rather than the belief itself. Thus a member of the caste of betel growers carefully preserves from 'impurity' the nursery where this creeping plant grows (Blunt, p. 294): here the notion is apparently that of a danger to the plant, rather as in societies in which the notion of impurity is not differentiated. Here is a very different example, an extract from a novel in Hindi, which has nothing to do with impurity. A student, the son of a city merchant, is overwhelmed with joy when he enters the room in which his wife has just given birth to a son. The feeling of the disproportion between himself and his happiness takes a characteristic form: he is seized with fear, he has not deserved this happiness. 'How should he, a sinner, take upon himself this divine grace for which *he has not prepared himself by any ascetic performance*', 'the mercy of God is unbounded' (my italics). Here, in conformity with a very ancient model, the necessity for a transition is felt if access to the sacred is to be obtained (Premchand, *Karmbhūmi*, p. 70). Examples of reversal are also encountered, where paradoxically it is the inferior who fears contact with the superior.²⁵ⁱ In the following example one sees the resurgence of the primitive idea of direct (and not social) danger from certain contacts, but applied this time to contact between social categories: the Pallar Untouchables of a Tamil village (Tanjore district) believe that if a Brahman were to enter the Pallar hamlet he and all the Pallar would fall prey to illness and misery.^{25j} All these facts testify to the existence of notions underlying, or connected with, that of impurity.

25.8 *Outline of a semantic comparison.* The opposition of pure and impure appears to us the very principle of hierarchy, to such a degree that it merges with the opposition of superior and inferior; moreover, it also governs separation. We have seen it lead at many levels to seclusion, isolation. The preoccupation with purity leads to the getting rid of the recurrent personal impurities of organic life, to organizing contact with purificatory agents and abolishing

HOMO HIERARCHICUS

it with external agents of impurity, whether social or other. The ban on certain contacts corresponds to the idea of untouchability, and all sorts of rules govern food and marriage. It must be pointed out that, segmented though it is, the relative degree of a group's purity is jealously protected from contacts which would diminish it. It must also be noted that each group protects itself from the one below and not at all from the one above, and that the actual separation from the one above is the result only of the exclusiveness of the superiors. Those rules which are dominated by the preoccupation with separation from the impure have been deferred to later chapters, so as to treat first of everything which relates the particular group to the whole.

In concluding this section, an indication of the limits of the examination in which we have been engaged and an outline of a more complete account are called for. We have endeavoured to reconstruct an idea which is fundamental and hence extremely all-embracing or encompassing for the Hindu. To do this, we have refused to confuse it with our habitual ideas, for example to trace purity back to hygiene. We have isolated a predominant idea which is absolutely different from our own. This was indispensable for the understanding of the social system, but it was only the first step in the comparison of Western and Hindu ideologies, and a brief indication can be given of how this approach could be developed. A situation similar to that encountered in passing from one language to another is involved, when it is recognized that a given semantic field is divided differently. Edible plants are apt to be classified in English into fruits and vegetables, whilst Tamil opposes *kāy* (green fruit which has to be cooked or prepared for eating) and *paLam* (ripe fruit). But in our case there is a hierarchical relation between different levels. The notion of purity is rather like an immense umbrella, or as we shall say the mantle of Our Lady of Mercy, sheltering all sorts of things which we distinguish and which the Hindu himself does not confuse in all situations. It is as if different configurations of notions cover the same sector of the semantic universe. If need be one could speak of function in order to pass from one case to the other, say for example that the idea of purity has hygienic functions, but clearly this would be to fall back into sociocentricity. Let us confine ourselves to noting certain obvious overlaps. Apart from the immediate physical aspect (cleanliness, hygiene) the etiquette of purity corresponds in

one way to what we call culture or civilization, the less punctilious castes being regarded as boorish by the more fastidious. In relation to the social organization, those who are pure are in one way the equivalent of what we call 'decent' or 'well-born' people. In relation to nature, we have indicated in passing how impurity marks the irruption of the biological into social life. Hence we find here a functional equivalent of that rift between man and nature which is so strongly in evidence in our own society and which seems to be unknown to, or even rejected by, Indian thought. Finally, the notion does not correspond solely to the prestigious, the beneficial, the auspicious (even though there are not only nuances but curious reversals): it is clear that in the general scale of values it tends to occupy a region which in our society derives directly from good and evil, but it introduces a relative rather than an absolute distinction: this offers an insight into the Hindu ethical universe.

26 *Segmentation. Caste and subcaste*

We have seen so far only one aspect of the structural nature of caste. Indeed, in attending to the general principles of the system we have been content to consider the caste as if it were one niche among others in a vast dovecote. Now the caste is not a niche or a block but is generally subdivided, at least at a primary level, into different subcastes, and there are often many further subdivisions. So much so that it has sometimes been suggested that the subcaste be considered the important group, the 'real' group. The Sanskrit scholar Senart was it seems the first to pose the problem. As has been said, Senart was concerned with starting from a precise idea of the modern state of affairs. He realized that it was not the caste but the subcaste which in reality bore some of the most important characteristics ordinarily attributed to caste: you do not marry just anywhere within your caste but usually only within your subcaste, and it is also the subcaste and not the caste which has judicial institutions: it meets as an assembly covering a definite locality, and can excommunicate its members. Hence, Senart concluded, it was the subcaste, the endogamous unit and framework or organ of internal justice, which was the fundamental institution and which in all logic ought to be called scientifically the true caste.