

Territory, Soil and Society in South Asia

edited by Daniele Berti and Gilles Tarabout

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The long shadow of Louis Dumont's masterwork *Homo Hierarchicus* hangs over the anthropology of South Asia still.¹ Some would have us believe that its influence was always pernicious and that Dumont achieved nothing, except to distort the vision of subsequent generations. This is surely too extreme. But there are certainly many points on which it is necessary to engage with his conclusions and to ask why he argued as he did.

One of the issues where Dumont's *obiter dicta* have been seriously misleading is in his insistence that the Indian (or South Asian) village has 'no sociological reality' as he and Pocock put it in their foundational manifesto, 'For a sociology of India', in the first 1957 issue of *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. Dumont and Pocock were arguing against the romantic view of India as made up of hundreds of village republics. What they were arguing for was a view of Indian society in which caste and kinship were the primary determinants of identity and belonging, and territory and economic position, while not irrelevant, were supposedly subordinate to them.

The book under review is an attempt to challenge this idea with nine empirical chapters arranged chronologically from the earliest Vedic times to the present, focusing on notions of territory, soil, and social belonging (though 'belonging' as such does not appear as a theoretical term). As with most edited collections, some of the chapters engage more with the main theme (as least as defined by the editors) than others.

The first two chapters, by Sanskritists Michel Angot and Gérard Colas, deal respectively with ideas about space, ritual, and sacrifice in the Vedas and with ideas about gods and their ownership of territory in texts and inscriptions. Angot's paper is long, detailed, and suggestive, but remains bounded by the world of the texts, a world that presupposes a nomadism

1 Full title: *Homo Hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications* (first published in French 1966, standard English translation 1980, University of Chicago Press).

that the bearers of the texts had already given up. Colas' chapter discusses Mimamsaka theorists such as Sabara who sought to defend iconophobic Vedism but clearly already knew of divine images that were supposed to own territory. Colas argues that is likely that 'A traditional Indian scholar could at the same time claim "erudite", or even iconophobic positions, and worship a divine image according to his personal education and family culture' (p.115). Colas' paper, grounded in a comparison of texts and inscriptions, comes up with a negative, though if correct significant, finding: the philosophical texts of ancient South Asia did not feel the need to philosophise about the relationship of a deity with its territory, leaving that to legal texts and to daily practice.

The next section of the book, on land, soil, and the sense of belonging, opens with Phyllis Granoff's chapter on geographical boundaries in medieval religious practice, ranging over Jain, Buddhist, and Vallabhite sources. Her conclusion is that what appear in the texts as sectarian debates about the right way to perform rituals are in fact geographical disputes between different peoples. In the following chapter we move to the ethnographic present: Caterina Guenzi and Sunita Singh examine the ways in which astrologers in Banaras diagnose soil. The poor bring a sample of the soil to the astrologer; the rich often pay for an astrologer they trust to travel long distances to examine a prospective house plot and perform rituals on the spot. Astrologers believe that they can sense the qualities of the place. One told them, 'If you are a pure, wise and honest person, omens come out by themselves' (p.195).

The fifth chapter is a long and detailed paper by Caroline and Filippo Osella, entitled 'Vital exchanges: land and persons in Kerala'. They begin from E. Valentine Daniels' rightly celebrated account of personhood and the land in the second chapter of *Fluid Signs: Being a person the Tamil way* (University of California Press, 1984). They go on to show how Keralans' ideas about persons, territory, and dwelling are deeply implicated in each other, with consequences for the way houses are built and people are cremated and the ash and other remains buried (unlike in other parts of South Asia, they are not washed away in rivers). They end with a plea for avoiding any 'all encompassing root metaphor' or model 'which entails predictability, coherence, consistency and so on'—in other words (unlike Sarah Caldwell's *Oh Terrifying Mother* (OUP 1999) or Dumont, whom they don't explicitly mention) they prefer an explicit methodology of 'bricolage

[which] may in the long run turn out to be far more generative and suggestive of connections' (p.234).

The third and final part of the book, 'Religious and Political Territories', has four chapters, by Gérard Toffin on the Newar villages of the Kathmandu Valley, by Gilles Tarabout on temple disputes in Kerala, by Daniela Berti on divinities and mediums in Himachal Pradesh, and by Christiane Brosius on BJP propaganda videos. Toffin establishes definitively that territory is a fundamental principle at all levels of Newar social organisation. Dumont himself used such materials (then only available from a superficial but none the less perceptive paper by Fürer-Haimendorf) to argue that Nepal was quite different from India. What Toffin does not establish is that territory in any sense *trumps* kinship. Territory works hand in glove with kinship at every level. Only in very rare and exceptional cases do non-kin ever get absorbed into the territorial unit. For all practical purposes such fluidity in kin groups (so common in Southeast Asia, for example) does not occur. The key question is whether there is any truth in Dumont's view that Nepal is quite separate from India, or whether rather, as argued by Sylvain Lévi (*Le Népal*, 1905, Leroux) and Robert Levy (*Mesocosm: Hinduism and the organization of a traditional Newar city in Nepal*, University of California Press, 1990)—neither of whom is mentioned here—the culture of Newar towns and villages is *typical* of India, though at an earlier period of history.

Tarabout returns the discussion to Kerala and introduces some valuable nuances into the discussion of territory in pre-modern India. In fact, far from Indians having no sense of territory, as the stereotype would have it, territorial jurisdictions are everywhere: 'If anything, far from having no territory, we have too many of them!' (p.284). The point then is that Indians did indeed have the notion of clear boundaries between territories—they were not all fuzzy as often claimed—but they *were* often overlapping and extremely complex. Such shared sovereignties could not be accommodated into the state-making of the colonial regime. This is illustrated through the case of the Annamanada temple, control of which was disputed between the kings of Cochin and Travancore for over a hundred years, until finally settled in 1909. In her chapter, Daniela Berti shows how local divinities with precisely defined territorial jurisdictions still play a key role in local life, speaking through their mediums, and providing legitimation to local politicians. Christiane Brosius, in the final contribution, looks at the ways in which the Hindu Right in India imagined and projected new ideas about

the Indian nation and its territory through the new video media in the early 1990s. This material is now also available in her 2005 book, *Empowering Visions: The politics of representation in Hindu nationalism* (Anthem).

It is a pity that *Territory, Soil and Society in South Asia* had to wait six years from its original publication in Italian in 2003 to appear in English and that, having done so, it could not have been provided with an index. It is a pity too that Levy's *Mesocosm* (cited above) was not drawn into the conversation. None the less, the collection is valuable for its attempt to support Dumont's contention that 'India [more properly: South Asia] is one' even while rightly disputing his downgrading of the territorial principle. Most South Asianists and Himalayanists should find plenty of good material to think about in this volume.