

INTERVIEW

India's Caste System: A Panacea for Peace or Conflict?

An interview with Dr. Kshemendra Kumar Upadhyay

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Overview

For over 1,500 years, anyone born a Hindu was right at the centre of the caste system. If one was born among the lower castes – the *Dalits* or the *Sudra* (Untouchables), a life of struggle and torment began. But life is the exact opposite if one is born a *Brahmin*. Rape, torture, and killings continue to take place in the name of caste. Dalit massacres have been committed since 1947 and still continue. The massacres in Andhra are still memorable if not causing tears of sorrow. With globalisation, the caste system has begun to change and, as a result, new conflicts between the old and the new guards are emerging. Ethnopolitics continues to play a key role in India's inter-caste relations. In this interview with Dr. Kshemendra Kumar Upadhyay, he draws on his 25 years of experience as a development expert working with the marginalised in India.

Keywords

peace, conflict resolution, culture, caste system, India

THE INTERVIEW

Question: Dr. Ubadhyay, there are a lot of misgivings about the caste system in India. That it enslaves others since membership is by birth. Do you agree? And how would you define the caste system in India?

Dr. Ubadhyay: It is a given at birth. So one can neither alter it nor fight it. Society in India is divided in castes, caste is decided by birth. One cannot change it. It is divided into different strata: high caste low caste. It was also based on the profession of an individual in older days.

Question: The caste system in India is receiving a lot of scrutiny from the media. It has been blamed for lots of conflicts taking place in India as a result of the oppression and discrimination. Do you think the caste system is embedded in society or in religion? Or both?

Dr Ubadhyay: Both. The media look for sensation and breaking news and not really for deep analysis. One does not follow the dictates of caste because he is not aware, but because he is economically dependent on it. On one hand, governments and reservation systems provide opportunities for the deprived but at the same time also reinforce the caste



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system, to the disadvantage of the ones who are deprived of opportunities because of their caste.

Question: Elite Indians have been on the forefront saying that the caste system is no longer there – that no one cares about it anymore. Is this true?

Dr Ubadhay: No. This is the view of some activists only. Please note that the caste system is still propagated by the people in power. Ordinary people now understand the issues of development. In Bihar, where the caste system is very strong, people now want to vote for development. But the caste system continues. Also, remember that 40% of the population live in poverty and they can't break away from the existing caste system. On the other hand, the preference for a government job has decreased with the emergence of private and international players, and people are getting jobs on merit.

Question: There are a number of inequalities associated with the caste system, such as cases of children born to 'slavery' where they have to work in the worst possible conditions till they die. Is it correct to say that the caste system is responsible for the huge levels of inequality in India?

Dr Ubadhay: This is really complex. People should understand that the caste system is linked to poverty, helplessness, and lack of support for the poor from the government. For inequalities, the caste system is hugely responsible but the political and economic systems in India are also responsible. But it's hard to unlink one from the other. The population is massive, and a voter turnout of usually 50% of the population decides who will govern. Therefore the rate of change is very slow.

Question: In the traditional caste system, members of the lower caste were strictly discriminated against. Has that changed now? What is the situation now?

Dr Ubadhay: To some extent yes, in percentage terms. But in absolute numbers, no.

The low caste has been excluded for a long time, that's for certain. It is good to know that agriculture is the 75% job provider in India. But this has decreased over time – the labour available for low caste in villages is low. It must be understood that the majority of low caste members work in agriculture.

Question: The high ranking members of the caste system such as the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, enjoy many privileges while the low ranking, the Untouchables, such as the Dalits (the downtrodden), live in abject poverty serving the Brahmins. Is this socially and morally acceptable in modern day India?

Dr Ubadhay: This is not a right statement. Lower caste has a creamy layer; their ways are no different from the upper caste behaviour 50 years back. And the upper caste has a sizable economically-vulnerable population. Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state of India, has a low caste Chief Minister (Ms Mayawati), who is spending huge amounts of money on installing her own statues rather than on welfare of the low caste. In this way she only uses the low caste tag to gain votes.

Question: In looking further at inequalities, do you think that the Dalits and Brahmins should not have dinner at the same table? In the traditional caste system a dinner hosted by a Dalit cannot be attended by a Brahmin. And at a dinner hosted by a Brahmin, the Dalit will be sent away. Is this still the case?

Dr Ubadhay: Not today. There is a new caste system, made of the "haves" and the "have-nots". It depends on the economic status and power of the individual. But somewhere, the mind set is like that, there is still hesitation based on the old system.

Question: Inter-caste relations have been a sore topic in India. There have been cases of Dalits being tortured or killed if information or knowledge of their involvement with a man or woman of a 'clean' caste (Brahmins-Kshatriyas) came out. What is your observation?

Dr Ubadhay: Yes, especially in north and central India; mainly because the traditional caste-based lords feel threatened by the newly evolving social order. Social aspirations are changing, everybody wants to grow. These changes are a result of globalisation that India is going through. There is also the rise of multiculturalism in India.

Question: Many years after the independence of India, caste based discrimination goes on. What is the Indian government doing? What about social movements and the international community?

Dr Ubadhay: The caste-based system is in melting phase at the moment. But the political parties and religious 'lords', as religious leaders are called, want it to continue in order to promote their own ethnic interests and wants. They want to use it to fuel sectarianism. These are the things that breed conflicts.

Question: Over the years the Dalits have worked hard to improve their status by going to school, thereby increasing their literacy levels. Some have converted to Buddhism and Christianity as a demonstration of protest to the ranks of the Hindu caste system. You just mentioned conflicts – do you



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believe that the caste system is responsible for the conflicts which have at times resulted in killings, torture or rape?

Dr Ubadhyay: Part of it is caste-based and some of it is circumstance-based. Say in Delhi, there are so many rapes, the rapists do not ask for the caste, they look for the most vulnerable target. Most killings are to extract money. However, the caste system takes its share of the blame.

Question: The Brahmins and the Kshatriyas are among the pure or 'clean' castes while the Dalits are considered 'unclean'. How does one explain to a child that they are born unclean?

Dr Ubadhyay: You don't have to explain it. The way society functions, they observe it. They see it. They know about it. They learn from the behaviour of elders. Children are told to behave in a certain way, and they learn it fast. The main explanation is that it is created by God.

Question: Wow! That's food for thought. In dealing with caste issues that have been arising, do caste councils still exist? If so, what is their role in modern day India?

Dr. Ubadhyay: Yes, they exist. And with the fast changing social order, they are trying to be in control and to make themselves relevant for society. Say in Haryana, a rich state with good agriculture, influential people in villages try to re-enforce the caste, and within the caste system, the *gotra* system (people born in the same sub-section of a caste), by killing lovers from the same *gotra*. It has happened many times in the past and still continues.

Question: But then, is there a struggle between the traditional and modern rules of the caste system in India and if so, what are some of the positive changes that have taken place so far?

Dr. Ubadhyay: Yes, there is. Everyone is looking for a better life. They want development, avenues for growth. They want to vote for people who can steer them towards a path of development. This might shock some politicians.

Question: Has the caste system fostered peace in India as regards inter-caste relations? If so, how?

Dr. Ubadhyay: There is still turbulence in inter-caste relations in India. It fosters peace in maybe up to 50% of the cases and then it creates problems in the other 50%. At the same time, it is important to note that there have been, and are, many successful inter-caste marriages in India today. But the media likes to focus on the negative examples of failures of inter-caste relations.

Question: As an expert who has worked with the marginalised for over 20 years, what would you suggest as a way forward for tackling the problems associated with the caste system in India?

Dr. Ubadhyay: There are so many things I would suggest, but I would focus on the following:

- Inclusive growth, which is to say, create infrastructure, development will follow!
- Opportunities for all, irrespective of caste. Merit should be the criterion. Lower castes should receive support for education and jobs reserved for them at entry level only (not beyond it).
- We also need livelihood opportunities and health facilities.
- To promote family planning and meet the need for it without caste reservations.
- It is necessary to create awareness about the girl child and for the empowerment of women without caste concerns.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Kshemendra Kumar Upadhyay has worked in the development sector in India for over 25 years. He has managed projects, at a national level, to prevent migration, human trafficking and the spread of HIV/AIDS, and has also spent time working on the Building Livelihood Options project for communities in Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar States of India. He has coordinated other projects and done research commissioned by Plan International, the Royal Danish Embassy, USAID, UNIFEM and IIED London. ■



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Jack Shaka is an international affairs expert focusing on peacebuilding, conflict resolution and democratic governance. He is a reporter for Africa News, run by Africa Interactive based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and covers social issues. Jack is author of *The Refugee: An odyssey into the refugee life* and co-author of *Silent No More – Youth Legislative Theatre Process in Kenya*.



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