



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Caste and the corporation, in India and abroad

Description: India's caste system remains alive and thriving, both in India and in its global diaspora. Seven decades after the passing of laws to fight discrimination, caste continues to dictate who Indians can marry, their prospects for education and jobs, and even where they may live. Caste's pernicious effects also extend to businesses, from Mumbai to Silicon Valley, holding sway over both individual careers and corporate performance. Prof Hari Bapuji and Dr Dolly Kikon join presenter Ali Moore to discuss the growing reach of caste in a globalised world. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

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Voiceover:

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Ali Moore:

Hello, I'm Ali Moore, this is Ear to Asia.

Hari Bapuji:

There is a lot that we need to do as businesses, recognizing that caste diversity is low, recognizing that caste discrimination exists, recognizing that people are excluded from the markets and organizations because of caste, and recognizing that people are excluded from higher education institutions because of caste.

Dolly Kikon:

The caste system will continue to survive and thrive pretty much like racism. Until and unless we actually look at caste violence and call for an end to it. It will thrive and survive because it's found a global home. And that's the dangerous thing.

Ali Moore:

In this episode, India's caste system and its lasting global impact.

India's caste system and its impact on organisations. In this episode, caste and the corporation in India and abroad.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne.

More than seven decades ago when newly independent India used its constitution to outlaw discrimination based on caste. And yet this millennia-old system of social stratification derived from ancient Hindu practises is still very much alive, even well beyond India's borders.

In 2021 many Indians at home and in the diaspora remain subject to an implicit hierarchy that influences or constrains their education, work, where they live and even who they marry. But the impact of caste discrimination, particularly for those on the lower rungs of the caste system, is not limited to individuals, families or communities. Business also feels the pernicious effects, including large corporations, where the dynamics of caste differences play out among diverse work forces from



Mumbai, all the way to California's Silicon Valley.

Joining us to look at caste today and what's being done to push back against the discrimination it gives rise to, Hari Bapuji, Professor of Strategy and International Business, and anthropologist Dr. Dolly Kikon, both from the University of Melbourne, they join us via Zoom. And welcome Dolly and welcome Hari.

Dolly Kikon:

Thank you very much, Ali.

Hari Bapuji:

Thank you Ali for inviting us onto this podcast.

Ali Moore:

So just how alive and indeed thriving is the caste system in 2021. Hari, as we said, India's constitution bans discrimination on the basis of caste, so what relevance does it have in India today?

Hari Bapuji:

Although the constitution has banned discrimination, it initiated several measures to improve the lives of the underprivileged or lower caste. The caste system has not really gone away. The effect of caste has not gone away and in fact, it has increased and also has become global like above you can see the effect of caste in the South Asian Diaspora around the world. So it becomes an important aspect because it has not only increased but also has become global now.

Ali Moore:

And Dolly, you speak from deep personal experience don't you?

Dolly Kikon:

I do and I'm speaking from Melbourne, so I would like to acknowledge the indigenous people of the land, the Wurundjeri people and pay my respect to elders, past, present and emerging. This is something I think that really connects us in terms of historical violence with separate colonies like Australia to the former colonies in South Asia and I belong to the Lotha Naga community, so I belong to a scheduled tribe in India. When it comes to the caste question, it is completely alive, it is thriving and like my colleague, Hari, said, it is abolished in terms of I think constitutional rights. We're looking at the right to equality, which is really an integral part of the Indian constitution but when it comes to everyday lives, it's really thriving and alive.

As an anthropologist I just want to call out Pallavi Gupta's work. She looks at the entire caste hierarchy when it comes to even public space cleaning like the railway station. If you look at Indian railway stations in terms of I think films, in terms of just the tourist nostalgia about stations, it's very, very visible as a marker of public space. What Pallavi Gupta is doing is actually looking at how the mechanisation of cleaning technologies is so tied up with institutional violence and caste structures that the lower caste women particularly the Dalit cleaners are not given access to any kind of mechanised technology. So if there's a machine that's cleaning let's say shit or garbage in the railway station in India that you see, you look at the caste hierarchies it'll be really somebody of an upper caste person who will be actually touching on the mechanised machine. So where it comes perhaps Ali, the question about caste and how relevant it is, it is that relevant, even as we think about technology advancement, you see caste being tied into that.

Ali Moore:

Dolly that's such a visual and very real experience and I suppose example of the impact of caste, but



before we look at more of them, if we could just have a history lesson. Hari, what's the history of the caste system in South Asia? How did this centuries of division actually begin?

Hari Bapuji:

It's a bit hard to really like give a clear and credible account of how this came up. The recent genetic evidence is giving us some more information and insight into this, but it seems like there are two groups of populations. At least that's what the genetic evidence is showing. One is the ancestral, North Indians and the other is the ancestral South Indians. At some point in time I think the caste system has been introduced. So this is one account. The other account is that this is just a normal organisation of society in terms of some kind of hierarchy, it is for division of labour and things like that. Over a period of time it has strengthened and turned into a system that is discriminatory that puts people at a disadvantage and privilege.

So these are multiple accounts in terms of how caste system would have occurred, but I tend to focus more on how it is at the moment and how it is perpetuating and how it is disadvantaging people, and how it is creating inequalities that are problematic not only for societies and individuals but also for businesses.

Ali Moore:

But Hari if we do look at the history of it, tell us for example about the Manusmriti, this authoritative book on Hindu law that dates back at least 1000 years before Christ.

Hari Bapuji:

If we look at the Manusmriti, that is one of the texts and there are arguments that it is not necessarily the authoritative text, but there are references to some kind of system of dividing people into groups across many texts and in some ways again, I am not trying to be an apologist here but I think the reality is that some kind of division of people into professions, into classes has been natural to many societies and we would find those in several scriptures. So if we talk about Manusmriti, it is a text which, in fact, authoritatively and clearly categorises people and prescribes who can do what. And a lot of things that we see today in fact we can trace to what has been said in Manusmriti, like if it look at names, it talks about who should have what kind of first name and what kind of last name.

So having this two part name structure or giving that structure to people, and giving occupations to them, and prescribing who should marry whom, and who can marry how many times and prescribing who gets what kind of punishment for what kind of action, who has what kind of rights and responsibilities, all of these things have been prescribed in Manusmriti. It is being contested but we can still see a lot of ways in which some of the existing practises can be traced to the Manusmriti.

Ali Moore:

And Dolly for people who are not familiar with the caste system, there're essentially four main categories, aren't there? And yet there are actually thousands of different subset of caste, aren't there?

Dolly Kikon:

That's right. The practice and the project of caste, it's to do with this expanding greater experiment, right? Because caste as a practice definitely exists, it is institutionalised, it is perfectly, smoothly running in terms of any kind of structural violence that we see, and we have to I feel look at this conversation not only as an Indian practice but as a greater of India experiment that starts all the way perhaps in the Hindutva – Hindu Right – imagination starting from Afghanistan all the way into Indonesia, so that's kind of the mapping that goes on there.

I would like to say that colonisation had a big part in propagating the myth of the superior race. If you look at colonial administrators like Herbert Risley's work, for instance, you can actually look at that



beginning from the early part of the 20th century how census, how practices in a way were centralised in this concept of anthropometric method where the measurements of human bodies of the faces of the nasal index were actually becoming a central focus of tracing what race became superior in this conversation, which was actually used by the Nazis as well.

How is this relevant in the Indian caste system? It was very relevant in propagating the Indian caste system as something that was superior, and that's how we see these myths being propagated about upper caste Brahmins having an Aryan, having a European genetic composition. And time and again we have to understand that as this myths are being weaved in the 19th century where British colonisation and British colonial administrators played a central role in bringing eugenics, actually to collaborate in this building of colonisation in the subcontinent. For British colonial authorities they saw a perfect match collaborator in the upper caste Brahmin community and that's how lower caste, in a sense, are perceived to have a non-European genetic composition. So you see that division right there, this myth being propagated which actually also became a racial one and at the same time enhanced caste.

Ali Moore:

Hari do you agree with Dolly, particularly about the aspect of eugenics?

Hari Bapuji:

About the aspect of eugenics, central to the caste system is the idea that people are graded. So there are some people who are superior than the others, so that goes on and on. As you mentioned, there are thousands of castes, which are occupational categories, which are categorised into four broad Varnas or four broad categories with Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras and then there are the Dalits are untouchables and then there are the Adivasis are the indigenous groups.

All of these people are supposed to be different, at least the way Manusmriti or the way the caste system categorises or portrays these people is as if they are different races, which are, some are superior and some are not superior. That's one aspect that we need to keep in mind. And in some sense there is a similarity to race there, right? That there are some races that are pure, some races that are superior and some races that are not. And in this particular case, whether we call them as a race or a group or a category or a caste, there are some that are superior and some that are inferior. Where I disagree is that this is not necessarily related to the Hindutva or Hinduism alone.

If you look at caste, in some ways the myth is that caste is relevant only in India, and caste is practised only by Hindus. It is true that we can see some references to caste-like structure in Hindu scriptures, or scriptures that are from the subcontinent, but we have evidence to show that caste is practised by Christians, caste is practised by Sikhs, caste is practised by Muslims. So we have a caste system across the religions and then we have caste outside of India. And it's not necessarily what is specific only to India, it spanned across the Indian subcontinent, so that's the second aspect. The third thing that I would like to clarify is that colonisation has definitely had a strengthening effect on caste. They've definitely enumerated, they've had introduced census, so they had clearly identified caste and caste groups and gave them different privileges as the privileges and customs were existing at that time. So in some sense colonisation has strengthened caste hierarchies, but at the same time, caste and caste hierarchies preceded colonisation.

Colonisation is a couple of hundred years old, whereas caste system is thousands of years old. I think that's something to keep in mind and finally we can see some of the racial aspects as visible aspects, right? So if you walk into a room, if there're only white people or black people or brown people you can say that it's not diverse, but that you cannot say with caste. It is an invisible feature, it's an invisible characteristic.

Ali Moore:

So Hari, you say caste is invisible, how easy is it to know what caste someone belongs to? What are the



markers that reveal a person's caste?

Hari Babuji:

People can figure out the caste of a person through a number of means. It's a combination of various factors that goes into identifying what the caste of a person is. So the very common way to find out is the last names. So, the last name indicates the caste, particularly those of the upper castes. And this again goes back to Manusmriti, where it prescribed that Brahmins should have the first name which reflects knowledge, and Kshatriyas should have a first name which reflects courage, and strength, and Vaishyas should have first name which reflects wealth, and Shudras should have a first name which would reflect their servitude and would invoke content.

So, the first and last names clearly would tell what the caste of a person is, particularly in the Northern parts of India. The other ways we can find out is their dietary practises. Vegetarianism is common to many upper castes, particularly the Brahmins and Vaishyas, that's the second way that you can find out. The third is the location of the house. Typically the areas within these villages and towns and cities have been demarcated for various castes. So some localities are known by their caste. You can tell caste by the locality in which a particular person lives. And you can also identify it based on what are the occupations of the parents and grandparents.

Because upper caste people had access to education for several generations, you would find them in elite professions, in knowledge professions, whereas the others or the lower castes would be typically found in lower ranks of the hierarchy and in professions that do not depend on knowledge, they depend on manual labour.

Finally, there is a joke that goes around which is that, "How do you tell if someone is an upper caste or not?"

Is that they would tell you. In a conversation they would find a way to express that they are upper caste.

Ali Moore:

So Dolly, you talked a little earlier, I mean you mentioned the technology and the cleaning systems on the Indian railways but in practise what do the restrictions mean for an individuals ability to, I suppose reach their full potential, to make a better future, because it would seem that caste strips away agency.

Dolly Kikon:

Ali, even before we invoke agency, which is I think quite a powerful term. When we think about caste and caste practises it's really about this everyday humiliation, right, which is founded on violence. And here we are talking about thousands of years of impunity and coming back perhaps to the process of colonisation', as an anthropologist, I say that, that's really, really, fundamentally important for us to remember that India as a post-colonial country today in terms of the institutions are all, majority of them, are established by the British colonising authorities.

So in that sense, if we look at for instance even agency here. Let me just give you the everyday life of a prisoner in India. In 2020, Sukanya Shantha did this wonderful study about the prison system and how the caste laws govern even the Indian prison system. For instance if there's a prisoner who is sent to a prison, the first thing that's done is to be interrogated in terms of the jati, the caste or in terms of perhaps the sub-caste categories. And that's how a prisoner in a typical Indian system, in a typical Indian prison would be shown his or her place. And by that I mean even inside the prison system, here a very violent structure. We're talking about where prisoners are assigned duties. So if you are a lower caste or an Adivasi you'll be meant to clean, do the cleaning jobs of the toilets, perhaps given the broom. Once again the broom and cleaning is really a significant part of stripping away of that agency.

For the cooking department, the prison manual clearly states that any Brahmin or sufficiently high caste Hindu prisoner is only eligible to do that.



Ali Moore:

But Dolly, in the broader community, does it essentially put a very firm ceiling on upward mobility or can you transcend your caste designation.

Dolly Kikon:

Very challenging and extremely hard. It's very clear. If you go to most urban cities in India, you have in Hindi the Safai Karmachari colonies, the people who do the cleaning are really designated to live in a separate suburb. The expansion of Indian urbanisation on the basis of labour here, which is very, very normalised. For instance there is a amazing feminist geographer, her name Malini Ranganathan, and her work on Bangalore, also known as Bengaluru is very important. She shows how, even in terms of this illegal constructions what you call the slums or the ghettos around Indian cities are basically in a way categorised as suburbs or slums where perhaps Dalits and Adivasis would stay or where the middle upper caste workers would stay. And Malini's work clearly shows how in a city like Bangalore, urban spaces and ecologies are really dictated by caste practises.

So if there's a Dalit slum in an Indian city, the authorities would be much willing to actually criminalise its inhabitants and the settlement as an illegal settlement. Secondly they would have the impunity to actually evict the settlers and also claim and take away the land for larger development purposes like perhaps building a big shopping mall, or building a five star hotel. Coming back to the question of agency, we have to see caste and caste practises as something that is really centrally integrated into the neoliberal economy, and as well as the market economies that have come up and we can't take the urban Indian city experiences away from this.

Ali Moore:

And Hari, I know that you've written [that] position and mobility are nonnegotiable under the caste system and yet we do have affirmative action initiatives in a range of areas in India, don't we? So how do those two things sit together.

Hari Bapuji:

So there are two things there Ali. One is that you're looking at economic mobility. Some of the people born in the lower caste can always gain economic mobility to certain extent, but that doesn't change their social position. So their caste remains fixed. They can gain a little bit in terms of class which is often defined or which is often informed by education and income and occupation, but caste position is very much fixed.

Now affirmative actions just like the caste has been outlawed or abolished, affirmative actions have been introduced but that doesn't mean they have been implemented to the extent that they should've been implemented.

Ali Moore:

Are we talking about quotas Hari, is that the sort of thing? Quotas for government jobs, quotas for education?

Hari Bapuji:

Yes, yes. So the quotas for education and quotas for jobs have rarely been implemented in the way that [they] have been designed. So as a result what you see is that even with the quotas, the lower caste people end up in the lower rungs of the organisation, whereas the upper caste people are in the upper echelons of the organisation. And this is across the various professions. If you take the university, vice chancellors, they all are upper caste. If you take the top bureaucrats, despite affirmative actions, the quotas, I don't remember seeing any top bureaucrat from lower caste. If you look at the management faculty in the Indian Institutes of Management which are supposed to



implement affirmative action. There are not even 100 management faculty who belong to the lower caste and it might probably seem as if it's natural because lower caste, so there not many people there, but we're talking about a billion people. Out of billion people there are not even 100 people who could become management faculty in IIMs after 70 years of quotas? So this is the kind of implementation that we are looking at in the sense that although there is a law, there is a problem with the implementation.

Ali Moore:

But is it just a problem with the implementation of law, Hari? Or does it go further than that? We see it for example in the debate about gender equality that when you look at organisations, corporations for example you have boards, that they're filled with men and it's easier for men to appoint men. Is that part of the issue when it comes to change? That you can have affirmative action, but it is easier to appoint from your own caste.

Hari Bapuji:

Again, two things. One is that the affirmative action is the bare minimum. So this applies to jobs or entry level jobs, and in some cases it was also applied to promotions but that's always contested. And the affirmative action, the quotas are only for the government service or the public sector organisations. They have not been implemented by the private sector or the corporate jobs, so that's one reason why you wouldn't see much movement or much mobility of lower castes or much presence of lower castes in the corporate sector, so all the other things that you would see with respect to race and gender and ethnicity related discrimination and resultant inequalities with respect to recruitment, with respect to promotion, all of those you would see in the case of caste as well.

For example if you look at the board structures itself, across all the corporate boards in India, 90% of the positions are filled by two castes whose population percentage is less than 10% and that would be the same for many other professions, whether you take media, media houses as I mentioned, the faculty positions and things like that. Companies have done very little, particularly the private sector has done very little to improve the caste diversity in organisations. And in this particular study that I was mentioning, there are only three directors who are from the lower caste and that is after affirmative action. So three out of like a couple of thousands, I forget the exact numbers.

Ali Moore:

You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, and just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its societies, politics and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others, plus you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website which again, you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au.

I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by Professor Hari Bapuji and Doctor Dolly Kikon. We're talking about the lasting impact of India's caste system and how it plays out in organisations.

Ali Moore:

I want to return to that issue of corporations and organisations in a minute, but Dolly just before we do, how do you see the reasons why the caste system has survived and indeed in many ways thrived? Do you see it very much connected to those who set the narrative?

Dolly Kikon:

The caste system has thrived and survived, and it will continue to survive and thrive, pretty much like racism. One of the reasons why I say that until and unless we actually look at solidarity movements and



join the civil and political rights movement to look at caste violence and call for an end to it, it will thrive and survive because it's found a global home, and that's the dangerous thing. It's found a global home where in a way it's thrived that we have seen with the cases that you are citing from the Silicon Valley and also Hari's work on the private sector. We have seen that how capitalism and market economies are spaces where caste and caste practises thrives. That shows us I think a couple of things. First, it has to do with power structures. Second it has to do with labour practises, and third it has to do with the continued devaluation of labour that market systems and capitalist economies propose and validate.

Ali Moore:

Hari let's get specifically to organisations but come at it from a global perspective. Dolly talked about how caste has found a global home. What does that look like in an international context? Dolly mentioned Silicon Valley there. What are we seeing in terms of the impact of caste beyond India's borders?

Hari Bapuji:

If you look at the impact of caste outside of India or South Asia, it started with the migration. Let's look at another recent migration. The economic migrants who've gone to the Western world for better opportunities for their education or employment. So a number of them because of their generational wealth and generational access to education, happened to be from the upper caste. Until 2000, most of the people who migrated to the developed West were from the upper caste. So much so that recent surveys find that in the US, 90% of the immigrants are from the upper caste. When we say upper caste we can say that is about 20%, and they have really imprinted or they have really developed a profile of who is a good immigrant or who's a successful immigrant. So someone who's like English speaking and who has had a certain type of education and certain type of networks and who has certain types of cultural practises, whether it is yoga or whether it is vegetarianism, if you look at the Indian population, like the majority of it is not vegetarian but Indians are often considered as vegetarian.

So this has had an effect on the later immigrants, some of whom are from the lower cast and their ability to fit into the organisations, and their ability to network, and their ability to use those networks for professional advancement. And that is what we are seeing as a struggle now in the Silicon Valley. If you take the example of Cisco which is currently in the courts. In this particular case, a lower caste individual, particularly a Dalit whose identity was outed by his upper caste friends, they also happen to be his superiors but they were from the same institute, the Indian Institute of Technology.

So once his identity was outed as a "reservation candidate", that's the kind of slur, it invokes a number of stereotypes about one being less meritorious, one being incompetent and that had an effect on his career growth and his interactions. And when he took it up to the HR department in Cisco, they were unable to deal with it because they could not recognise how caste operates. They could not recognise how caste interactions might be influencing the lives of people who are from the lower caste. And because they also did not have caste as a protected category or a recognised category in their own system of diversity and inclusion, they decided not to take action on that and that is now in the courts.

Ali Moore:

But Hari, indeed it's in the courts and in California, the government has used the civil rights act, so to what extent is caste discrimination covered by other anti-discrimination provisions, other legal provisions in various forms of legislation?

Hari Bapuji:

So if you look at the various forms of legislation, the only one that can probably cover is the discrimination by descent, but here again, the descent can be categorised either based on the caste as we would see the discrimination taking place or by ethnicity, in which case, everybody belongs to the



same ethnicity of South Asian or Indian. The descent covers to some extent, but it doesn't fully give the measures to deal with it.

Ali Moore:

Hari, you made the point earlier that corporations have done very little to increase caste diversity. So what's the cost benefit analysis for corporations when it comes to working in caste based societies. Why have they not done more to increase caste diversity?

Hari Bapuji:

So we have to see it from two different perspectives, like one is either India or South Asia, those societies where the caste is predominant. There, the affirmative action did not apply to the private sector and they did not see a reason to implement it. They thought it would compromise the merit and all of those things. And the movement towards diversity and the benefits of diversity have become known only in the recent past, and the discussion is happening. So to that extent the private sector has not implemented affirmative action, implemented or tried to improve caste diversity. So when there is no experience for them that became the same template for the companies from outside which either operate in India or which have engaged with the Indian workforce. So they decided not to see caste. So by not seeing caste they have reproduced the caste systems within their own organisations, either through harmless practises in terms of, what kind of arts and what kinds of cultural practises and what kinds of festivals you promote within organisations are in terms of whom you hire.

By not seeing caste, they've identified the ideal profile to be those of certain backgrounds, certain family backgrounds. And those happen to be upper caste, like those who have the right kind of social networks, those whose social networks span multiple influential fields where the organisation can benefit from. So if you are hiring a top manager from an upper caste, you can tap into their networks and that is good for the business in some sense.

Ali Moore:

So Hari, what about the risks to a corporation if their management, if their upper levels see the world from the point of view of only particular castes, not all castes?

Hari Bapuji:

Clearly that has its own risks and it can create losses of companies. So what research is showing is that people at the upper echelons are of higher caste, they tend to hire people from similar castes for their top positions. And second what we're seeing is that they tend to acquire companies where the top managers or the boards are filled with similar caste people. And not only that they acquire companies where they find this caste similarity, but they actually pay higher premium for those kind of companies, where they see similar caste directors. So that's one way that you would see that companies would face [inaudible 00:34:49]. And third you would see that companies which have low caste diversity, which are filled with higher caste people, tend to have to have lower market value than those who have more caste diversity. So these are some of the ways in which it can affect companies. So these are some financial ways and are concrete ways.

But the other ways that companies can actually face losses because of not having caste diversity is not having access to the ideas that would come from the bottom ranks of the society. In case of countries like India, the bottom rungs of the society happen to be lower castes and also lower socioeconomic status. So that means the poor markets are not being tapped. There are also other implications in terms of one of the ways caste affects people is that it restricts the consumption of people. Like for example, lower castes and Dalits are not supposed to consume things, like they're not supposed to flaunt their possessions, so that can have an affect on the overall market size. So there are different ways in which this can affect the market growth overall. And if we take a step back and look at it from a broader perspective, we know from the experience of various countries that if women are not



participating in the economies equally, then they tend to have lesser growth.

And similarly like any group, whether it is lower caste or whether it is people of religious minorities, if they are not participating in the economy or they don't have the full opportunity to participate in the economy and contribute to the economy, then you would see lower growth. So these are all the ways in which we see that we are getting into a cycle where we are suppressing the opportunities for a large population and that obviously means lower growth. So if India wants to become a 5 trillion economy, it cannot do without improving the lives of the lower caste, who form about 70 to 80% of the population. And you need to bring them into the economic activity and into the formal economic activity, and only then you can achieve growth.

Ali Moore:

And if that is quantifiable, why is not sufficient incentive to bring change?

Hari Bapuji:

As far as caste is concerned this is just beginning in terms of the conversation. We have seen similar conversations with respect to gender; we have seen similar conversations with respect to race. For example, the quantifiable loss to GDP, because of race has been studied by some of the consulting companies, but that has not been done in India. This again is a result of the Western companies, looking at Indian market, through the lens of the upper caste who see what's happening in India as normal and not problematic because they don't see some of these aspects. They don't have people in their network who belong to the lower caste, who face some of these atrocities.

Ali Moore:

Dolly how do you see, the future of caste in India, and when we look at the situation in organisations and corporations as Hari just outlined, where do you see the real pressure for change coming from?

Dolly Kikon:

The challenge is actually to do this kind of diversity and around affirmative action in the Indian caste system is actually grounded on lower caste people, Adivasis and tribals being incompetent and that they lack merit. So in a sense of how caste violence and upper caste sensibilities, upper caste abilities and skills being more superior and being finer and being more trained in a sense to take out this kind of leadership positions is really very, very rampant. And so if you looking at then, perhaps to look at the future of diversity, the market economy and the logic is good, but I think we'll fall into this trap again because if we think about market logic, the market in capitalism market economies thrive on the basis of differences and inequality.

So as an anthropologist the conversations for me actually rest on equality and on justice. The fact that there's human societies, we see each other, one another as equals and as part of human community, with empathy and with a sense of care is really central.

If we once again bring in the market logic to say, "Hey, we're going to make more profit if you have more Dalits." "Let's make more profit if you have a black person, right at Vogue in New York," I think we are in danger. So in a sense for me then, the basis for the future would be to look at what is merit.

At Stanford, for instance, the department of engineering and the hard science are blatantly horrible when it comes to diversity hires. In India as well, when it comes to the science and technology departments and institutions they are far, far behind when it comes to looking at scientists from the Dalit communities and also looking at tribal and Adivasis.

So if we are looking at the future of diversity, we have to really look at the lower caste Dalits and tribals, Adivasis as people who are absolute suitably at the centre and core of participating in a full citizenship negotiation dialogue and experience. And I think that is the core of it.



Ali Moore:

But how do you get there? How do you create a more inclusive society at every level when your decision makers have the benefit of being in the upper castes?

Dolly Kikon:

This podcast for instance. The fact that we are talking about this in Australia in Melbourne, the fact that Ali you are here asking some questions, the fact that I am here as a Scheduled Tribe all the way from India, working at the University of Melbourne, making sure that I am here in a podcast talking about this. Action, writing, working with policies, my commitment as a teacher inside a class. And I think this is a movement, this is a cause that will most possibly outlive us. So what do we do as communities, not only as people with Indian citizenship or an Indian passport but as a global community recognising that “do we have space for this kind of differences based on caste inequalities, do we have space for racism in this world that we're leaving behind for our children and for the future generation.”

And I think that is a question not only for people from India, but for all of us together looking at questions of equality and respect for one another.

Ali Moore:

We started the podcast by pointing out this is a system that is thousands of years old. Are you optimistic that in time it will evolve, it will change, it will become more equal?

Dolly Kikon:

This is tied to the market relations that we're looking at, this is tied to extraction, this is tied not only to people who are protesting against caste systems but also to the indigenous people's struggles, to the Black Lives Matter, to anti-race movements. This is actually part of really a global community of struggles that we're looking at. So the moments, Ali, for me as an anthropologist and as somebody who is deeply, deeply committed to engaging with this, to resisting it, to talking about it. The moment I see there's something that is different from that, so the indigenous struggles and movements here on extraction in Australia or in North America, I think I lose sight of it already because majority of the labour that's put in, in terms of even extraction sites, the new buildings coming up in shining India, who's labour goes in there? The lower caste of Dalits, Adivasis, tribals who lose their land and once again this is reproduced in different forms. The building of cities, the building of malls. And I think the faster we are in a way to connect with it, the clearer picture that we see.

Ali Moore:

Hari are you optimistic about change?

Hari Bapuji:

I'm a little bit more optimistic. As Dolly was mentioning, the fact that we are sitting here in Melbourne and talking about this is a big change. I don't think anybody would've thought about this happening, let's say 10, 20 years ago, right? So I think there is definitely a moment to think of all of us as equal individuals and that is where I think we need to see the underlying premises or underlying principles that are dividing us, whether it is on the basis of religion or whether it is on the basis of skin colour, the idea is that dividing people into this system and then assigning them various attributes or various skills and occupations, I think this needs to change.

And once we understand this as a system, that is when we can create change and we can create conditions for change and the caste lens or the caste system gives us the tools to do this because caste is multidimensional. And that is the reason why Dolly's points that come from the justice perspective and my points coming from an economic perspective, both are equally valid because caste addresses both. It makes people unequal and it also gives different values to the labour of different people, right?



So there are multiple dimensions that we need to attack and there is a lot that we need to do as businesses, recognising that caste diversity is low, recognising that caste discrimination exists, recognising that people are excluded from the markets and organisations because of caste and recognising that people are excluded from higher education institutions because of caste and other types of inequality is very important. Through this recognition and through this exchange of ideas is how we move towards more equal society so I'm a little bit more optimistic because we wouldn't've been able to imagine the kind of progress that we made with respect to whether it is gender equality or racial equality 50 years ago, like we're in a much different world today than we were a couple of decades ago. So I'm a little more optimistic on this, but yes we do have a lot of work to do on this front.

Ali Moore:

Yes the challenges are enormous. Hari and Dolly, thank you so much. And before I let you go, if listeners want to hear more about your work and your thoughts on caste and other issues, where can they find you? Hari are you on social media or elsewhere?

Hari Bapuji:

I tweet as HariBapuji (@HariBapuji), my full name. And I'm on LinkedIn so people can also connect with me there and see what I write from time to time.

Ali Moore:

Terrific. Dolly, what about you?

Dolly Kikon:

You can find me and many of my other works particularly on food and food based discrimination in India @DollyKikon on Twitter. I'm also on Instagram, I post my research there, so definitely connect with me. And yeah, a shoutout to all the amazing people out there in the Dalit Justice Movement.

Ali Moore:

Sounds terrific. Both of you, Hari and Dolly, thank you so much for being so generous with your time and your insights.

Hari Bapuji:

Thank you Ali, thank you Dolly.

Dolly Kikon:

Thank you so much.

Ali Moore:

Our guests have been Harry Bapuji, Professor of Strategy and International Business and Anthropologist, Dr Dolly Kikon, both at the University of Melbourne. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. And be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcast App, Stitcher, Spotify or SoundCloud. And if you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple Podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show and please help us by spreading the word on social media.

Ali Moore:

This episode was recorded on the 15th of June 2021. Producers were Eric van Bommel and Kelvin



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