Survey on Inter-Caste Marriages and Untouchability

Why in news?

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A new survey called SARI (Social Attitudes Research for India) investigated what people think about inter-caste and inter-religious marriage.

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What are the findings?

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- People from all backgrounds said that they would raise objections to people marrying from other social groups.
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- Nearly 50% of the non-Scheduled Caste respondents in Delhi and 70% in Uttar Pradesh said that they would oppose a child or close relative marrying a Dalit.
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- There was even greater opposition to inter-religious marriages.
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- In Delhi, about 60% of Hindus said they would oppose a child or relative marrying a Muslim; a similar fraction of Muslims would oppose a child or relative marrying a Hindu.
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- In Uttar Pradesh, the opposition was even greater: about 75% of Hindus opposed marriages with Muslims, and only a slightly lower fraction of Muslims, about 70%, opposed marriages with Hindus
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- The survey asked respondents whether they thought there should be laws to stop marriages between upper castes and lower castes. About 40% respondents in Delhi and more than 60% in rural Uttar Pradesh said that such laws should exist.
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- Laws against intermarriage have been sought among the lower castes as well as the upper castes.
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- A higher fraction of women than men in each of Delhi, urban Uttar Pradesh,

and rural Uttar Pradesh said they would support laws against inter-caste marriage.
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- The idea that laws should prohibit inter-caste marriages was not confined to older generations. The only demographic factor that is strongly associated with support for laws against inter-caste marriage is education.
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How prevalent is untouchability?

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- Among non-Dalit Hindus in Delhi, a third said that someone in their household practises untouchability. In Uttar Pradesh, half of adults said that someone practises it.
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- In Delhi, half the adults in non-SC Hindu households, where someone practises untouchability, said they themselves practise it. In Uttar Pradesh 70% did.
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- These numbers are, we don't think that they capture the full extent of the problem. That is because some people know that it is not politically correct to admit practising untouchability to a stranger.
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- Even though women and men live in similar households, women are more likely to report untouchability in the household. This suggests that either men are uninformed or they are giving a socially desirable, but incorrect, answer.
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- Women may be more likely to report untouchability where it exists because they are less aware that it is not a politically correct thing to say.
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- Another reason why women may be more likely to report untouchability is it is often practised in the context of food, utensils, and domestic help.
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- Women are more likely to work with food and utensils than men, and so they are probably more likely than men to enforce untouchability.
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Why inter caste marriages are less prevalent?

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- Inter-caste or inter-religious marriages can make a person an outcast among his family and neighbours. He may even be barred from family inheritance. Even when families are not adamantly opposed to an inter-caste marriage, there is a strong belief that it is more convenient to settle down with a socially and culturally familiar person.
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- The finding that even many educated people think there should be laws against inter-caste marriage raises serious questions about our education system and whether it is doing enough to reduce caste and religious prejudice.
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- It is telling that many of the youth passing out of the premier technical and medical institutions still depend on their parents to choose their spouses.
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What should be done?

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- Each year, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment makes available 500 monetary awards to inter-caste couples. The small size of this programme makes it more of a symbolic gesture than an actual incentive, but it is nevertheless a good idea.
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- The government should be doing much more to promote inter-group marriage and to protect those who seek them. In practice, officials in the courts and the police often enforce divisive social norms rather than enforcing the laws. They may discourage or intimidate couples who try to marry across caste or religious lines.
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- Lack of government support in the face of family disapproval may be one reason why the India Human Development Survey found that **only 5% of marriages are inter-caste**.
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- To end untouchability will mean that everyone, from government official, to teacher, to young mother has to make an effort. Everyone needs to admit that untouchability is still a widespread problem, not only in rural India but also in urban India.
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- A study of primary school students in the United States found that white students who read about both the accomplishments of and the discrimination

faced by black Americans later displayed less biased attitudes towards blacks than white children who had merely read about accomplishments.
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- So, rather than simply denying the existence of untouchability it is time for parents, teachers, and even the government to start talking to children about ending these practices today.
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