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# The Smoke and Mirrors of Casteism in the US

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*Convoluted arguments that equate anti-caste activism in the US with 'Hindu-phobia' seek to reinstate casteist norms that dominant-caste immigrants are accustomed to.*

In April, Thenmozhi Soundararajan, a Dalit woman activist and scholar, was invited to deliver a talk at Google for Dalit History Month. She was deplatformed by dominant-caste Google employees who claimed that Sounderarajan was "Hindu-phobic" and "anti-Hindu." Tanuja Gupta, a senior manager at Google, had invited Soundararajan after oppressed caste employees approached her with instances of caste-discrimination they had seen in the company. After the talk was cancelled, Gupta resigned. Her letter of resignation, along with Soundararajan's letter to Google's (dominant-caste) CEO, Sunder Pichai, was published by The Washington Post.

Where does this charge of "Hindu-phobia" come from?

For many in the United States, there is not enough conversation about Asian religions, let alone on how casteism is systemic, institutionalised, and works across religions. Those who benefit from the caste system have sought to appeal to secular America's sense of tolerance for minority religions (seen as "foreign"). In doing so, they elide the reality of how caste discrimination happens in many religions - not just Hinduism - and simultaneously try and divert our focus from casteism into a dishonest claim of religious persecution.

## A diaspora problem

South Asian migration to the US is profoundly shaped by caste. In 1965, the US settler-colonial state changed racist immigration policies that had previously barred immigration from South Asia. But the law only allowed for the migration of skilled professionals - informally termed the 'Indian brain drain'. These professionals invariably belonged to dominant castes, with socio-economic privilege accrued over generations helping them gain professional degrees and the means to travel. They also had access to unspoken networks and what we call 'cultural capital'.

The dominant castes have the most power in defining what South Asian American minority culture looks like and thus set the terms for 'inclusion' and 'exclusion'.

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Even class privilege does not shield one from caste discrimination in the tech industry in the United States, where South Asians are prominent. In 2020, charges of caste-based discrimination at Cisco received widespread media coverage. The reportage opened conversations in dominant caste and non-South Asian communities about the extent of casteism in the US. After news of the Cisco case broke, Dalit Bahujan employees in other companies came forward with reports of harassment, casteist slurs and 'jokes', discrimination in opportunities for promotion, and retaliation for reporting.

Many South Asians in the tech industry migrate to the US on H1-B visas, which are employment based. You lose your job; you lose your visa. Thus, the Cisco case not only reveals the details of what types of discrimination Dalit Bahujan tech workers face, but also the level of precarity that oppressed-caste employees can face in trying to come forward and report caste discrimination.

The federal raid of a prominent Hindu temple in New Jersey and the forced labour of Dalit workers showed that casteism goes beyond just the tech industry and extends to people migrating on religious worker (R-1) visas. For non South Asian Americans, the case has been a shocking wake-up call to casteism and human trafficking in South Asian American communities.

In colleges and universities across the US, Dalit Bahujan citizens and migrants on student visas face a range of exclusions and discrimination from fellow students and faculty. Caste discrimination, exclusions, and marginalisation occur in colleges and universities nation-wide, from California to Massachusetts. For example, during a faculty senate meeting at my alma mater, the University of

Minnesota, on a resolution to recommend the recognition of caste, a Dalit student described the types of discrimination they face, including segregation, humiliation, and ridicule for even attempting to study caste. (The resolution passed). Dalit Bahujan women can face sexual assault by dominant caste individuals on college campuses.

Without a mechanism for understanding caste, its intersections with gender and sexuality, or the long and disturbing history and present of sexual violence against Dalit Bahujan women, where can a student report or find recourse?

> It is often the case that when oppressed peoples fight for mere equity, the voices of the privileged become very loud and they are given a platform for convoluted arguments.

The vast majority of scholars I work with in the US in my research discipline, South Asian Studies, are dominant caste. While I am on a first-name-basis with dozens upon dozens of South Asian scholars who are white or dominant caste, I know only five Dalit Bahujan scholars personally. Only two of those Dalit Bahujan scholars work in the US. The vast majority of scholars I have cited in my own work are dominant caste because the vast majority of South Asian scholars in South Asian Studies and in the US are dominant caste.

Imagine the experiences of Dalit Bahujan students and professors when academia is saturated with dominant-caste academics -who often do not cite Dalit Bahujan scholars, teach or research caste, nor interrogate their own caste networks, privilege, or power.

Colleges and universities in the United States have begun to understand the need to recognise caste in non-discrimination policies. In October 2021, the institution I work at, Colby College, added caste to our non-discrimination policy. It received widespread support from students, faculty, and staff. There was no pushback whatsoever. Colby College became the second institution of higher education in the US to do so. (Brandeis University added caste in their non-discrimination policy in 2019.) Other colleges and universities followed suit, including the California State system, which comprises 27 colleges and universities.

Unfortunately, since Colby College's decision, I have seen misinformation floating around. In media reports, the addition of caste in non-discrimination policies is being reported on as if it's a 'debate', or a 'controversy'. What this framing does is give people invested in upholding an inequitable system - from which they benefit - the same airtime as those oppressed by that system.

It is often the case that when oppressed peoples fight for mere equity, the voices of the privileged become very loud and they are given a platform for convoluted arguments. These convoluted arguments, at their base, seek to reinstate the casteist norm that dominant caste peoples are accustomed to. It is necessary to address this misinformation.

## Is recognising caste-discrimination 'Hindu-phobic'?

To recognise caste does not mean that a religious minority is being persecuted. It means that we protect anyone who may experience caste discrimination in any religion.

Caste is a form of descent-based discrimination, carried over generations. Casteism is systemic. Caste is also intersectional. When you excavate caste, you understand how patriarchal controls and compulsory heterosexuality work to engender and maintain caste divisions. Thus, to dismantle casteism, you must also work to dismantle the patriarchy.

> When you excavate caste, you understand that caste divisions and casteism exist in many religions including Christianity.

When you excavate caste, you understand that casteism works to uphold divisions of labour. Thus, to dismantle casteism, you must also work to dismantle discrimination in the workplace. When you excavate caste, you understand that caste divisions and casteism exist in many religions including Christianity. Thus, to dismantle casteism, you must work to protect caste oppressed peoples across religions.

When we recognise 'sex' in non-discrimination policies, we do not say that this is 'Christianphobic', even as we can point to passages in the Bible that are sexist. We recognise that sexism and transphobia can occur regardless of what religion you practice. Adding 'sex' to a non-discrimination policy thus protects ciswomen, transwomen, and non-binary folk whether they are Christian, Hindu, Muslim, or a member of any other religion. In a similar vein, having caste as a protected category protects caste-oppressed Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs. It gives recourse to anyone who experiences casteism in any religion.

It is true that a religious group may face discrimination in a country where they are a religious minority. For instance, Christians are a religious minority in India, where they have faced discrimination (and continue to). But there can be groups within a religious minority that enjoy privileges.

In the US, you can have members of a Hindu religious minority with caste privilege. You can also have members of other South Asian religions who are casteist.

Within the larger Christian minority group in India, we have dominant-caste Christians. I study how dominant-caste Christians have historically held socio-economic power and privilege through political alliances with dominant-caste Hindus. My heritage is dominant caste as my parents come from the domninant-caste Syrian Christian community of Kerala. My father and mother travelled along dominant-caste Church networks first to Germany (to study medicine and nursing respectively) and then to the US for jobs. Dalit Christians did not have that same access that my parents did because these networks were set up specifically for Syrian Christians.

Today, the majority of Christians in India are Dalit Bahujan. But the majority of Indian Christians in the US are dominant caste. Caste shapes all sorts of ideas for non-Indians in the US and Indian Americans alike about what an 'Indian Christian' church is like. It shapes Indian Christian professional organisations and social gatherings in the US. It encourages those who do not have the same caste identity in any of these enclaves to hide their identity.

## Are Indian Americans 'casteless'?

In 2020, data was released on Indian Americans in a Carnegie Endowment report entitled Social Realities of Indian Americans: Results From the 2020 Indian American Attitudes Survey. The data that the caste deniers draw from is the finding that "forty-seven percent of Hindu respondents report identifying with a caste, which means the majority (53 percent) said that they do not personally identify with a caste group of any kind."

This finding is used to make a big assumption: that since a majority of survey takers do not identify with a caste group, Indian Americans are not participating in casteism.

For those of us who study caste, it is very clear that not identifying with a caste does not mean a lack of casteism in the US, but rather, the ability of dominant caste peoples to claim 'castelessness'.

> When someone is casteist, it is easy for a 'casteless' dominant-caste person to see that perpetrator as the aberration, and not representative of themselves.

Castelessness is the phenomenon where those with caste power never have to name or interrogate that power. Emerging studies on castelessness are showing how this move is a very calculated way for dominant caste peoples to not address the upper hand they have been given in life by mere birth, and instead leave the labour of fighting casteism (and lay the blame for caste) on the oppressed. (A sample of such studes are at the end of this essay.) Since the most oppressed necessarily need to deal with casteism, they will identify with their caste. In relation, those who do not experience casteism can invisibilise their own caste.

'I don't see caste' is the mantra here. Leaning on 'castelessness', dominant caste identities are seen as outside the casteist system. When someone is casteist, it is easy for a 'casteless' dominant-caste person to see that perpetrator as the aberration, and not representative of themselves or anyone else in their dominant-caste networks.

The fact that 53% of Hindu survey respondents do not identify with caste, then, buttresses research on castelessness that shows that the very ability to invisiblise one's caste is one of the ways in which caste power functions in both South Asia and global South Asia.

It also suggests that which we already know: many Dalit Bahujan peoples need to hide their caste to gain access to resources and jobs and/or to avoid any discrimination they may face in dominant caste majority enclaves. As Yashica Dutt writes in her memoir *Coming Out as Dalit:*

We avoid talking about caste, hoping to somehow find a place in the world of upper-casteness that has been forbidden to us. We create upper-caste identities-stolen badges-that help us gain entry to a space that will reject us the moment it finds out who we really are. We nervously flash these IDs anytime we are grilled about our origins. Those who fail to

exhibit satisfactory signs of upper-casteness and those who refuse to are punished for trespassing, for being where they don't belong. Discrimination, humiliation, oppression are all penalties for not being upper caste, or simply for being Dalit.

While the proponents of this misinformation love to tout the 53% of respondents who do not identify with their caste, they fail to discuss the 47% of survey takers who *do* identify with their caste. This is a very large minority. To ignore that 47% is to engage in confirmation bias. Those spreading misinformation on caste as a protected category, in other words, are picking and choosing their 'evidence' from this survey.

The Carnegie survey itself has an odd omission. It mentions that casteism occurs in multiple religions; however, the survey designers chose to only ask Hindus about their caste affinities.

The largest number of Christian respondents in this survey, 5%, identify as 'Roman Catholic'. In my research, I have discovered that dominant caste Catholics invisibilise their caste with this label. They identify as 'Roman Catholic' distinguishing their upper-caste Catholicism from Bahujan 'Latin Catholics' without having to name their dominant caste. In other words: the homogenisation of 'Roman Catholics' without discussing caste and casteism within the Christian group, is one of the ways in which dominant-caste Christians themselves 'don't see caste' and thus, continue to invisibilise their own caste and casteist practices within Christianity. All the more reason why I find it puzzling that the survey designers decided to only ask about caste with their Hindu respondents and not inform their survey with due diligent research on caste in other religions such as Christianity.

Feminist research methods teach us that when you work with oppressed peoples, it is very important to make sure their voices are represented. Data is not neutral, especially when we know that caste has structured South Asian migration in the US. It is telling that 83% of the Hindu respondents in the Carnegie survey who identified with a caste group were from the "category of General or upper caste", and only 1% of the respondents who identified with a caste group were Dalit. Given this huge disparity between the number of upper-caste and Dalit Bahujan respondents, the need to approach this big data with an eye critical to power is a necessity. Without a critical eye to big data, we risk having the voices of the dominant castes - voices already given the platform in the US - becoming representative of all South Asian Americans and erasing the realities of the caste-oppressed within the Indian American minority.

## Does 'race' cover caste?

Another convoluted argument is that caste is already recognised under 'race'. This claim starts with the premise that casteism does exist and then goes to say 'just put it under another category'. If it exists, why not just make sure it is named, rather than bury it under something else?

Collapsing caste under race can erase the ways that someone from a dominant caste community can perpetrate *both* racism *and* casteism. Casteism manifests in assumptions about labour and skin colour and informed by a history of colourism, slavery, and is shaped by patriarchal controls over women's sexual 'choices'.

> Casteist attitudes can and often do inform anti-Blackness in South Asian American diaspora.

A good deal of my research looks at race in Kerala and race in the diaspora. Caste-privileged Christians believe themselves to be Brahmin converts. In turn, Brahmins in Kerala are racialised as 'Aryan' and differentiated from Dalit Bahujan 'Dravidians'. I examine how casteist assumptions about endogamous unions (in-caste or in-faith arranged marriages), labour, and colour informs anti-Blackness in dominant-caste Christian communities.

For instance, a participant in my research recounted a story for me. In their extended family, a child was born with dark skin. Supposedly, the husband had a quarrel with his wife around the time the child was conceived. Since she has spent some time at her natal house during that same time, she was accused by her husband of having an affair with a Bahujan worker on her father's rubber plantation. The husband then denounced the child and denied his parentage.

Such casteist attitudes can and often do inform anti-Blackness in South Asian American diaspora. Conversely, in the US, a Dalit South Asian American can face *both* racial discrimination *and* caste discrimination. Subsuming one category under the other would be detrimental to anyone who experiences *either* race *or* caste discrimination *or both*.

## The burden of 'proof'

Since Colby College added caste to its non-discrimination policy, almost every reporter who has spoken to me has asked: "Can you give me evidence of casteism at your institution?"

First, how is one supposed to gather evidence of casteism in colleges and universities when you do not have a mechanism for recognising caste? How can a complaint be brought forward? Who will recognise it if it is not recognised by the institution? And when such a chilly climate exists, why would anyone want to come forward when not recognising caste encourages those who experience discrimination to bear the burden of proof? All this points to the likelihood of anyone experiencing casteism to silence themselves.

Second, we are asking those who may experience casteism to expose themselves to violence, harassment, intimidation, retaliation, and other forms of discrimination before we act. Those who push forth this convoluted argument are asking for that discrimination to happen multiple times before they would get on board and take any action. What type of person would argue for large numbers of people to be harmed before they could be bothered to care? (This is not a rhetorical question. I really truly do not understand how a person could argue for this.)

Third, for any caste-oppressed person who experiences casteism, we ask for them to relive it, we ask them to retraumatise themselves, and, through second-hand witnessing, to potentially invoke more trauma to any caste-oppressed person who may have similar experiences of discrimination. We ask them to put their pain on display for everyone multiple times in order to have their experiences validated by those who do not experience this discrimination.

This is exactly how power functions: those who have access to power and privilege cut off access to 'others' and then demand that those excluded and marginalised 'prove' they were cut off and discriminated against. It is set up to uphold the status quo and to simultaneously cause further harm.

By recognising caste in non-discrimination policies colleges and universities in the US are taking the first steps to dismantle casteism. At Colby College, we added 'caste' to our non-discrimination policy by educating our community. I urge readers to not be bamboozled by the misinformation that is pushed by a vocal few, and rather, to take the time to listen to the experiences of Dalit Bahujan peoples in the US and to learn.

This is not 'controversial' or a 'debate'. It is a step towards basic human rights.

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