

WHY CASTE MATTERS IN CANADA

Chetna Association of Canada ([https://
chetna.ca](https://chetna.ca))

&

Ambedkarite International Coordination Society – Canada
(<http://www.aimscanada.org/>)

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“Casteism exists in Canada. It is impacting caste-oppressed Canadians in unlawful ways that impact our civil rights and create unsafe schools and workplaces. And we know what the remedy is: changing policy and building awareness of caste equity.”

Vijay Puli, Executive Director of Toronto-based South Asian Dalit Adivasi Network (SADAN).¹

WHAT IS CASTE?

Caste negatively affects more than 1.9 billion people worldwide, including 2.5 million South Asian Canadians, crippling the quality of life for those who must contend with caste oppression.

The word ‘caste’ originates from the Spanish and Portuguese word ‘casta’, which means “race, lineage, tribe or breed”.² It was the Portuguese who first employed *casta* in the modern sense of the English word ‘caste’, by which they meant endogamous, hereditary, Indian social groups who they encountered when they arrived in India around 1498. But **caste has existed for thousands of years in the Indian sub-continent and across South Asia and was used by British colonizers in India to gain support of upper caste people.**³

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/3/10/can-toronto-help-canada-end-casteism-in-the-classroom>.

² According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition comes from John Minsheu’s 1569 Spanish Dictionary.

³ We know that caste existed before European colonialism because there were intentional movements challenging Vedic Brahmanism. Buddhism, for instance, emerged in the 6th century as the antithesis of Hindu Upanishadic absolutism and an indictment of caste and clan divisions. As well, Jainism was founded in the 7th century BCE, long before European colonizers arrived. In addition, in the medieval era (especially 15th - 16th century), several marginalized Sant-poets (including Yari Sahib, Kabir Ji, Dadu Dayal Ji, Ravidas or Raidas Ji, and Guru Nanak Ji) and Mukhti/liberation movements (like Sikhi) emerged to offer anti-caste alternatives to Brahminism. In short, in India, caste and anti-casteism has existed for about 3000 years, and modern colonialism and anticolonialism started about 600 years ago.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891 – 1956) – who was born into the status of Dalit and known as an economist, social reformer, and political leader – argued that the origins of caste lie the core scriptures of Hinduism. Prachi Patil defines **caste as the Indian that “classifies individuals in descending order of hierarchy** into four mutually exclusive varna’s [social stratifications] – the Brahmins (priests), the *Kshatriyas* (warriors), the *Vaishyas* (merchants), and the *Shudras* (servants), beyond these four castes is the fifth caste of the *Ati-Shudras* or *achhoots* (untouchables).⁴ This fifth caste is now known as Dalits, meaning “broken but resilient”. The caste hierarchy was brought into existence on the religious principle of purity and pollution, reflected in the graded hierarchy of ranks based on caste, in which the Brahmins are deemed the purest and in command of religion/Dharma and its rituals, while Dalits are deemed to be at the bottom. Challenging or disobeying caste customs and laws is considered as a violation of the Brahminical scriptures.

Some important characteristics of the caste system:

- **Caste is embedded in fixed ideas about birth/inheritance (comes from the family one is born into and is not changeable throughout a person’s life).**
- **Caste endogamy (the custom/restriction of marrying within the limits of the caste you are born into) is a mechanism of retaining control over women’s labour and sexuality.**
- **Occupational restriction (jobs are deemed to be intergenerationally unchangeable).**
- **Segregation (where they can live/move).**
- **A person’s caste can be identified by their last name, family background, food habits, class, and occupation.**
- **Class and caste can overlap but are not the same – you can be poor and have caste privilege, or Dalit and wealthy.**
- **Brahmins are not the only perpetrators of caste privilege – casteism exists in Sikh, Muslim, and Christian communities.**
- **Race and caste are not the same system, though connected as systems of oppression. Race classifies people into hierarchies based on physical**

⁴ Prachi Patil, “Understanding sexual violence as a form of caste violence,” *Journal of Social Inclusion* 7(1), 2016, p.59.

traits, whereas caste (in theory) has no distinguishable physical characteristics. Members of the same ‘race’ may be assigned several different caste groups.

Many of the lowest ranking castes face discrimination, oppression, apartheid, the usurpation of their land, and brutal violence at the hands of the ‘upper castes’. Today, caste-based discrimination, and specifically the idea of untouchability, is technically illegal in India. However, this hierarchy and the discriminatory behaviours and actions that accompany it remain present.

Caste oppression exists in Canada. The issues of caste discrimination and caste apartheid are not just a problem in India. While South Asians in Canada face systemic racism externally, caste systems are practiced by many internally.⁵

WHY CASTE SHOULD BE ADDRESSED IN CANADA

I. Systemic caste privilege exists in Canada

By the 1990’s, upper-caste Hindu’s emerged as the most successful of ‘visible minorities’ in Canada. As noted by Chinnaiah Jangam, a History Professor in Canada, “the shared history of English colonial rule made the North American landscape familiar to new immigrants from India, especially caste privileged Hindu’s with generations of English-language education... They occupy high positions in the corporate sector, government, and politics. Thus, they emerged as the cultural ambassadors of India. Notably, given their inherited caste privileges, they had easy access to elite education that enabled them to navigate and succeed in the white power ecosystem.”⁶

Jangam goes onto to say that,

Privileged caste people in positions of power, while not acknowledging their caste privilege, inflict insidious discrimination, micro-aggressions and

⁵ The term South Asian homogenizes people of several different national, religious, linguistic, faith-based, tribal and caste affiliations. We come from one of the most populous regions of the world, that includes India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Tibet, Maldives, and the Caribbean.

⁶ Chinnaiah Jangam. 2023. “Who is Afraid of Caste Equity in Canada?”, The Wire (13 March) <https://thewire.in/caste/who-is-afraid-of-caste-equity-in-canada>.

humiliation at workplaces and social gatherings. Canada, especially the Greater Toronto Area, is home to countless oppressed caste people. They face everyday forms of aggression, exclusion, and discrimination.

.... The ludicrous denial of caste is like the white supremacist denial of racial oppression and the persecution of indigenous people in Canada.⁷

II. Casteist ideas are embedded among the growing South Asian population

According to Census Canada, South Asians represent the largest visible minority in the country.⁸ The 2021 Census noted that the proportion of Canada's population who reported being Muslim, Hindu or Sikh has more than doubled in 20 years. India is not only a main source of immigrants to Canada, but it is also a pipeline for international students. In 2020, for example, the Toronto School Board reported that South Asians made up the second largest student population – after white students – at 22%.⁹

Many from this population live in Ontario, British Columbia, and the Prairies. South Asians maintain close ties with their birth country/place of origin, whether from India, Sri-Lanka, Pakistan, Fiji, or the Caribbean,¹⁰ and **carry deeply embedded ideas about caste hierarchies with them when they move to and settle in Canada** (as well as other parts of the world).

III. Caste harms people: caste discrimination, harassment, and violence

In the US, Equality Labs has conducted a national survey on caste. There is no equivalent data source in Canada. While more data is needed about caste-based discrimination, harassment, and violence in Canada, **casteist hierarchies and discrimination are widely evident in Canada:**

⁷ Jangam 2023, no page.

⁸ Islam F., Khanlou N., Tamim H. South Asian Populations in Canada: Migration and Mental Health. *BMC Psychiatry*. 2014; 14:154. doi: 10.1186/1471-244X-14-154.

⁹ See the Toronto School Board Report at: <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/research/Research/School-During-the-Pandemic/Student-Demographics-for-Virtual-and-In-Person-School>.

¹⁰ Kelly Tran, Jennifer Kaddatz, and Paul Allard. 2005. Canadian Social Trends, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-008.

- Dalit students have faced caste-based humiliation, slurs, jokes, stereotypes, and bullying by other students of South Asian origin, which are sometimes repeated by white and other non-South Asians.¹¹
- Dalit and caste-oppressed students not reporting casteism because they don't expect teachers and principals to understand.¹²
- Dalit students, including international students, report having to hide their last name or pretend to have an upper caste surname, to avoid isolation and hate.¹³
- Upper caste parents preventing their children from engaging with students from people in lower caste categories.
- Religious places are sometimes segregated, with those from a lower caste being denied entry and/or not permitted to participate in religious practices and ceremonies.
- Matchmaking / marriage is heavily determined by caste divisions.¹⁴
- Dalits experience workplace discrimination across industries.
- Women being beaten because they have an interfaith and inter-caste marriage.¹⁵
- In 2023, Toronto School Board Trustees are cyber-bullied by members of the Canadian Organization for Hindu Heritage Education for supporting a motion to address caste discrimination.¹⁶

¹¹ See, for example: <https://thegauntlet.ca/2023/03/31/caste-based-discrimination-in-canada-its-more-likely-than-you-think/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/17/toronto-caste-discrimination-schools>; <https://thewire.in/caste/toronto-school-board-caste-resolution>.

¹² See, for example, <https://thewire.in/caste/toronto-school-board-caste-resolution>.

¹³ See, for example: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/caste-india-canada-students-1.6450484/>.

¹⁴ The Samast Brahman Society of Canada, for example, undertakes private matchmaking on Facebook, and its administrator has openly stated that “We only allow Brahmins to enter the group. Different organizations exist to address different communities. Likewise, ours is only for one particular caste”. See <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/caste-india-canada-students-1.6450484>.

¹⁵ See: https://www.reddit.com/r/toronto/comments/11qg8rr/why_i_am_grateful_for_the_toronto_school_boards/.

¹⁶ See: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-tdsb-caste-system-discrimination/>; and <https://thewire.in/caste/who-is-afraid-of-caste-equity-in-canada>.

- In 2019, Professor Chinnaiah Jangam, a Dalit scholar at a Canadian university, reported that Dr. Ragini Sharma, President of the Canadian Organization for Hindu Heritage Education, protested his lecture (held at the Noor Cultural Center in Toronto) on caste-based violence in India.¹⁷
- In April 2022, Dr. Jangam reported to CBC News that he had received thousands of caste-based hateful emails over the past five years, along with abusive voicemails on his office phone because of critiques he made of Hindutva in India, the right-wing ideology of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).¹⁸ He closed most of social media accounts in response, in part, he said, to try to shield his family.

IV. Need to protect minorities: a human right issue

As Harvard Professor Dr. Ajantha Subramanian explains in the context of the North America,

“Oppressed castes are a minority within a minority. They are doubly disadvantaged by virtue of being both racially marked and caste marked. Recognizing caste as a source of discrimination is the recognition of this double disadvantage. It acknowledges that there are stark differences of caste power and status within the South Asian...community that carry over from a long history of inequality in South Asia.”

Caste discrimination, harassment, and hate is currently not recognized as an enumerated ground in Canada. If it were,

- 1) It would compel institutions to prevent caste-based discrimination.
- 2) It would enable oppressed caste individuals to seek redress for discrimination, harassment, and human rights violations.
- 3) It would encourage institutions and employers to expand the scope of equity, diversity, and inclusion by intentionally recruiting under-represented oppressed castes.

¹⁷ See: <https://thewire.in/caste/who-is-afraid-of-caste-equity-in-canada>.

¹⁸ See <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/academics-harassed-criticism-india-politics-1.6402486>.

CASTE EQUITY IS A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE, NOT AN ATTACK ON ANY RELIGION

Caste is a source of discrimination and inequality that is not limited to any one religion. It is prevalent within many South Asian communities. Moreover, many individuals who face caste oppression are themselves Hindus or Sikhs. As noted by Dr. Ajanatha Subramanian of Harvard University, “To claim that adding caste to anti-discrimination policy is anti-Hindu distracts attention from the pressing issue of caste discrimination by making privileged caste Hindus and not oppressed castes into the real victims”.

Dr. Subramanian also notes that, “Extending protections to oppressed caste will in no way scapegoat Hindus or any other religious group. This is tantamount to saying that race as a protected category scapegoats whites or that gender race as a protected category scapegoats men.”

The [Feminist Critical Hindu Studies Collective](#) (composed of people of Hindu heritage) have debunked arguments that challenging casteism (and Islamophobia) is Hinduphobia, as some claim.

SOME CASTE RECOGNITION IN CANADA

On June 1, 2023 the [City of Brampton](#), in the Greater Toronto Area, became the second municipality in Canada to pass a motion against caste-based discrimination.

In April 2023, the [British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal](#) ordered two B.C. residents to pay \$9,755 in compensation for using casteist slurs during altercations.

In April 2023, The [City of Burnaby](#) has also adopted measures to combat caste discrimination. In a landmark move, Burnaby included caste as a protected category in its equity policy. This not only offers legal protection to the victims of caste discrimination but also sheds light on the presence of caste-based bias in the Canadian landscape. The City of Burnaby also declared [April 14 Dr. Ambedkar Day of Equality](#) for his efforts “to bring about a just social and economic order”.

On March 8, 2023, the [Toronto district school board](#) (TDSB) – the largest in Canada – made history by passing the first jurisdiction to recognize the reality of caste

discrimination and to combat it. The TDSB voted to ask the Ontario Human Rights Commission for a framework to address caste-based discrimination. This historic initiative in Canada recognises caste oppression on par with racism and sexism. If mandated, all public and private institutions will include rules against caste discrimination in their diversity, equity and inclusion policies. Victims will have access to legal recourse.

In April 2022, the [Province of British Columbia](#) declared April Dalit History Month.

CASTE RECOGNITION IN THE US

Thanks to the efforts of caste-oppressed individuals and allies, caste discrimination has started to be explicitly prohibited in universities, civil rights organization, workers' unions, and corporations. Here is the list of institutions that have endorsed caste equity and added caste to their non-discriminatory policies:

- [Columbia University](#) (2023)
- [Seattle City Council](#) (2023)
- [Rutgers University Faculty Union](#) (2023)
- [Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance](#) (2023)
- [Harvard Graduate Students Union-United Auto Workers](#) (2022)
- [4 schools at Minnesota University](#) (2022)
- [Brown University](#) (2022)
- [Colorado College](#) (2022)
- all [California State Universities](#) (2021)
- [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) (2021)
- the [California Democratic Party](#).
- [Colby University](#) (2021).
- [Brandeis University](#) (2019)

In addition, companies like Apple and Amazon updated their employee conduct policies to explicitly prohibit caste. As of April 2023, the [California Civil Rights Department](#) is also pursuing a lawsuit of discrimination and harassment against two employees based on caste.

CASTE EQUITY / ABOLITION IN CANADA: CHALLENGES¹⁹

In April 2023, the Chetna Association and the Ambedkarite International Mission Society hosted a symposium at UBC to bring together community members, scholars, and activists to think through the progress and challenges faced by Dalits and caste-oppressed people in Canada and elsewhere. Below is a summary of the challenges specific to Canada identified at that Symposium.

IGNORANCE / STRUCTURAL PRIVILEGE

- Caste treated as a problem within India, but caste also exists in Canada.
- General Canadian population does not have knowledge about how caste manifests in white societies and institutions.
- Dominant caste people often deny that caste discrimination exists.
- Gaslighting by caste-privileged people.
- Caste-oppressed people in Canada also face racism, colourism, economic challenges, and gender oppression.

RESOURCES / ORGANIZING

- Lack of finances/resources for Dalit and caste-oppressed organizations.
- Some organizers aging and need to train next generations.
- Uncertainty about approaching other members of community in fear of casteism.

CANADIAN POLITICAL RELATIONS WITH INDIA

- In June 2023, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's National Security Advisor said that India is among the top sources of (state and non-state) foreign interference in Canada. There is concern that, among other issues, this foreign interference is detrimentally affecting caste-oppressed people in Canada.
- Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy seeks to establish closer economic and scientific ties to India, which leaves Canada open to criticism that it is ignoring human rights violations against Dalits and other caste-oppressed people in India.

¹⁹ The Challenges section on this page, and the Recommendations starting on page 11, were generated from participants of the 'Dr. Ambedkar International Symposium on Emancipation' held at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver 21-23, 2023.

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

- Staff, faculty, senior administration, including in equity/human rights offices, do not have adequate knowledge of caste oppression to address it.
- International students are reporting higher rates of casteism in universities.
- Student clubs and societies tend to be social (yoga, Diwali etc.) and don't generally deal with issues of casteism.
- Student clubs and associations not always welcoming to Dalits and caste-oppressed people.
- Caste-based exclusion, jokes, slurs by other South Asian students.
- It is primarily upper caste teachers and faculty teaching.

INSTITUTIONAL

- Religious spaces are hierarchically organized, and caste based.
- In workplaces, promotions being denied because of caste.
- Caste privilege is institutionalized and normalized.
- Endogamy – expectations to marry someone from the same caste.
- Feelings of unworthiness among Dalits and caste-oppressed people become embedded.

CASTE EQUITY/ABOLITION IN CANADA: RECOMMENDATIONS

RAISING AWARENESS

- Raise awareness via equity audits, data collection, creative and artistic opportunities.
- Create anti-caste reading / consciousness-raising groups: learn from concepts given by Dr. Ambedkar.
- Making caste oppression and anti-casteism a mainstream issue.
- Identify ways to raise representation of Dalits and Dalit issues in legislatures across Canada.
- Create learning opportunities for MLA's, MPs, Mayors, City Councillors, and other officials.
- Raise awareness about Dalit History Month, Black History Month, and other community histories.

- Combat colourism - many of the slurs and comments about caste-oppressed people reify stereotypes that caste-oppressed people are darker and less attractive. This can leave Dalits struggling with their self-esteem.

COMMUNITY-BUILDING/ ALLIANCE-BUILDING

- Build relationships and cross-community affinities – collaborate to avoid siloing issues.
- Support/mentor Dalit youth and build new generation of youth activists.
- Uplift people in community, especially Dalit women as role models!
- Share idea of giving a portion of income/wealth to anti-caste education organizations.

INSTITUTIONAL

- Establish a Dalit-led Caste Equity Task Force in BC and Canada-wide.
- Review policies to address caste at your institution.
- Lobby city councils, provinces, employers to recognize caste as an issue of discrimination and inequity that needs to be addressed.
- Exercise fundamental rights.

CONTINUE TO BUILD CAPACITY OF DALIT AND CASTE-OPPRESSED COMMUNITIES

- Support ways for Dalits and other caste-oppressed people to tell their own stories.
- Build and promote Dalit media.
- Interview people of Dalit background / collecting testimonials.
- Organize own conferences to address issues that Dalit people facing, whether in India or diaspora.
- Help students learn at a young age – for those Dalit and caste-oppressed to be strong and positive about identity, and for others the importance of challenging caste.
- Support spiritual and faith-based journey of Dalits and caste-oppressed people. (Dr. Ambedkar emancipated people by converting to Buddhism and hundreds of thousands of people followed – helped build confidence and provide spiritual support.)

ECONOMIC SECURITY

- Entrepreneurship is about making profit to help solve problems of world.
- As entrepreneurship, offer support in whatever way is manageable, whether money, time, knowledge.
- Promote self-reliance via employment and businesses.

EDUCATION SYSTEM

- Identify sources of funding and work with universities to create a Chair position in Dalit and anti-caste studies.
- Develop and resource a think-tank/centre on anti-caste and Dalit studies in Canada.
- Create endowments to fully sponsor Dalit and caste-oppressed students.
- Provide educational guidance to young Dalit and caste-oppressed people.
- Make available books with speeches and writings on caste and anti-casteism from Dalit leaders and thinkers like Phule and Dr. Ambedkar.
- Establish scholarships for Dalit students and advertise these widely.
- Pay for publishing anti-casteist work and books by Dalit and caste-oppressed (academic and non-academic) people.
- Bring caste awareness in orientation events, including for international students.
- Work to have caste recognized as an issue of discrimination and inequity in school boards and universities.
- Privileged educators should create spaces that are safer for Dalit students and faculty.
- Rewrite disciplinary knowledge to account for caste e.g., in history, anthropology, political science etc.

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