



Initiative to Mitigate Caste-Based Discrimination FAQ – Frequently Asked Questions

Jointly prepared by

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Table of Contents

1) What is the caste system?	3
2) What is caste-based discrimination?.....	4
3) Why is an intersectional analysis important for understanding caste-based discrimination?	6
4) How can caste discrimination be eliminated?	6
References.....	7
Recent Examples of Changes to Discrimination Policy.....	8
For Further Reading on the Discussion in Canada on Caste-Based Discrimination	8

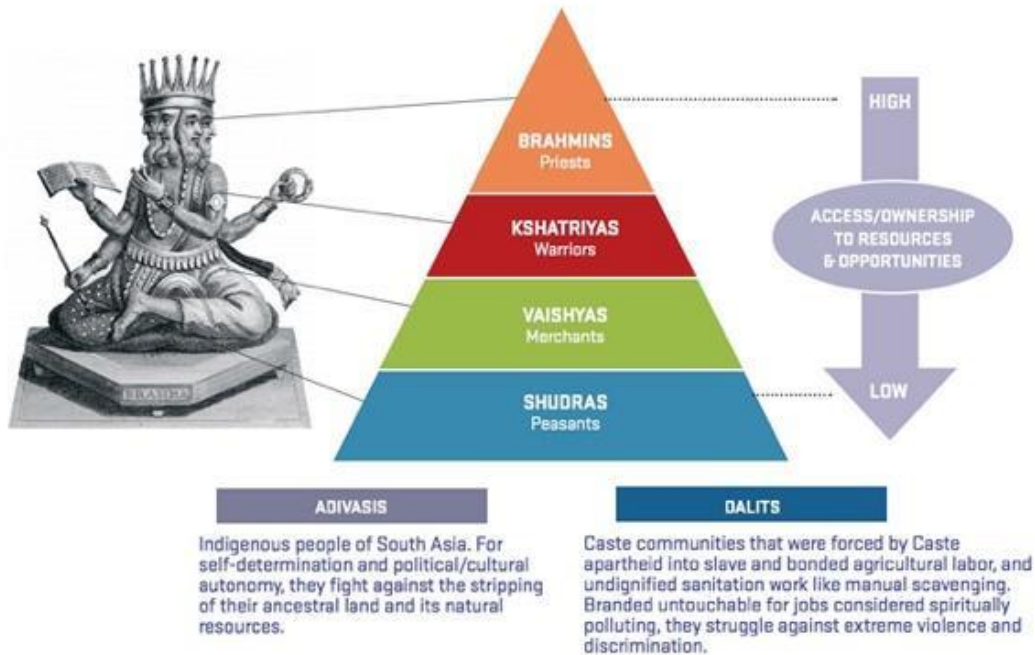
FAQ - Initiative to Mitigate Caste-Based Discrimination

1) What is the caste system?

Caste is a 2,500-year-old system of dehumanization, division of labour, and discrimination that continues to shape the lives and life chances of over 1 billion people in any context and space where people from the South Asian subcontinent live. It is a system of inequality and violence that is written into Hindu scripture and by ancient Hindu lawmakers (Manu); pre-ordaining the spiritual and social status of human beings in life, labour, and death, based on the caste group into which they were born. Brahmins are at the apex of the caste hierarchy and the purity, worth, and dignity as humans that are attached to people born into the Brahmin caste is anchored in this fact. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas are *savarna*, a term used to describe the three dominant caste groups who control most of the power and resources in social relationships in a society founded upon Brahminical supremacy.

There are four castes within the caste system and labour is divided accordingly. Brahmins have claimed monopoly control over religious and secular knowledge. Next in the caste hierarchy are Kshatriyas who are warriors, associated with political, state, and military power. Vaishyas are merchants, traders, and moneylenders who hoard considerable power in the economic sphere. And fourth in the caste hierarchy are Shudras, who constitute the working classes in agrarian, industrial, and service sectors. These four castes are within the caste system. Outside the fold of the caste system are Dalits who were derogatorily known as “untouchables” because their occupations were considered too polluting. In fact, the caste system dictated that their birth predestined and bonded them into the occupations of cleaning human waste, handling human and animal corpses, handling flesh and meat. The chosen title of Dalit literally means broken, but as a political and intellectual identity, it is a rallying cry and mark of resilience for those derogatorily labeled “untouchables”. Also outside the fold of the caste system are the region’s Indigenous peoples known as *adivasis*. *Bahujan* translates literally to mean much of the people. *Dalit Bahujan* is a term that is used to indicate political solidarity among those exploited, dispossessed, and oppressed by a Brahminical supremacist state and ideology, including *shudras*, *adivasis*, Dalits and those who converted out of Hinduism to escape caste such as Muslims and Sikhs.

While these four categories within the caste system have hundreds of sub-categories in practice, and there are considerable differences in the caste hierarchy in different regions of India, the primary characteristics of spiritual and social status attached to caste groups has been a resilient feature of the system across space and time. This resilience is explicable when we notice that caste endogamy is enforced through heteropatriarchal control over sexual reproduction, marriage, and sexual violence, alongside caste apartheid in work, residence, commensality, food practices and education—all routine ways in which the caste system is maintained across space and time. Here is an image that depicts the caste system created by the Dalit feminist civil rights organization Equality Labs, based in the United States.



2) What is caste-based discrimination?

It can be tempting for dominant caste communities to think, feel, teach, and learn that the caste system was an ancient practice, or, at worst, one that occasionally emerges in the Indian landscape in rural areas that have not caught up to modernity. But that would be a fiction belied by statistics and evidence in lived experience. Dominant castes who saturate academia have also peddled the prominent postcolonial theorization that caste was an invention of British colonialism, but that is not the case. Colonial laws simultaneously opened land markets and education to Dalit Bahujan and embedded caste into capitalist systems of accumulation by dispossession. The caste system was thus consolidated by British colonial capitalism but also preceded and outlasted it, if not gaining an entrenched modern reality in contemporary Indian society and state.

Mohandas Gandhi led a mostly dominant caste Indian nationalist movement and gave Dalits the patronising name of Harijan, meaning “children of God.” Gandhi focused on abolishing untouchability but not the caste-based division of labour itself which he viewed as innocuous and functional. Starting in the mid-19th century, Bahujan leaders Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule, as well as Fatima Sheikh and others, constructed an anti-caste theory and political action, centred on reclaiming access to education understood as political consciousness. The visionary Dalit leader, theorist and architect of the Indian constitution, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar built on this legacy and scripted the slogan “Educate, Agitate, Organize” to mobilize the formation of the mass Dalit movement at the turn of the 20th century. Dalit Bahujan women were a crucial part of both historical moments of mobilizing against caste apartheid.

The postcolonial Indian state may have legally abolished untouchability, but, caste apartheid is a part of everyday, institutional, rural, and urban reality in India. According to the Indian Human Rights Commission Report on Caste Atrocities, cited in Dalit feminist organizer and theorist Thenmozhi Soundararajan's book *The Trauma of Caste*, in India, which remains the epicentre of caste apartheid, "every hour two Dalits are assaulted; every day three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered, and two Dalit homes are torched. A crime against a Dalit happens every eighteen minutes" (Soundararajan 2022, p. 16; see also, Saxena 2004, p. 33 [here](#)). Drawing on the 2004 report, Soundararajan notes that:

- 37% of Dalits live below the poverty line.
- 54% of Dalit children suffer undernourishment.
- 83 out of 1000 Dalit children die before they turn one year old.
- 45% of Dalit population do not know how to read and write.
- 33% of Dalit households do not have basic facilities.
- 33% of villages have Dalit homes where public health workers refuse to visit.
- 28% of villages have police stations where Dalits cannot enter.
- 38% of government schools have Dalit children sit separately.
- 48% of villages deny Dalit people access to water sources.
- 1 in 4 Dalit women between 15 and 49 is under-nourished.
- 67% of Dalit women have experienced sexual violence.
- 39 is average age of death for Dalit women.

The numbers are staggering and express the magnitude of the effects of caste discrimination in India.

Caste violence, discrimination, and aspirations for liberation from caste travel with the diaspora, not least under colonial rule and the indentured labour system that spread across Oceania, the Caribbean, the Americas, South Africa, and Southeast Asia. Caste has subsequently traveled with the diaspora—both as an escape from caste oppression and as a privilege of caste mobility and every intersectional complexity between migration and dispossession.

The postcolonial Indian government terminology for those formerly known as "untouchables" who self-designate as Dalits, is the term Scheduled Castes. As Rawat and Satyanarayana note, the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women in 1995, Dalit participation in the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, and the growth in publication of Dalit literature animated Dalit resistance and voice in the public sphere. The Indian government's reservation policies (affirmative action) for Scheduled Castes in the spheres of education and employment contributed to the growing numbers of Dalit peoples in higher education and those employed in professions outside those pre-ordained by the caste system. This has strengthened larger numbers of Dalit Bahujan peoples in the diaspora calling attention to caste discrimination wherever it exists. As per the 2016 report, [Caste in the United States](#) researched and produced by Equality Labs,

- 25% Dalit people report verbal or physical assault.
- 1 in 3 Dalit students report discrimination during their education.
- 2 out of 3 reports being treated unfairly in their workplace.
- 60% report experiencing derogatory jokes and comments.

- 40% report feeling unwelcome in places of worship.
- 20% report feeling discriminated at a place of business due to caste.
- 40% Dalits report being rejected in romantic relationships due to caste.
- 1 in 2 Dalit people fear being outed.

3) Why is an intersectional analysis important for understanding caste-based discrimination?

One cannot understand the resilience of the caste apartheid without attention to the heteropatriarchal structures and relationships that enforce caste endogamy through prohibiting inter-caste marriage, through sexual violence and even death. Dalit women's bodies are simultaneously considered a source of pollution and an object through which Brahminical heteropatriarchal power is expressed. This explains why Dalit feminism has been the foremost feminist formation on the subcontinent even though its history and centrality continue to be erased in dominant caste feminist scholarship, practice, and leadership.

As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar noted, caste is a division of labourers, that is written into division of labour in society. As such, class cannot be understood distinct from caste and its specificities of gendered, sexual violence, labour exploitation, landlessness, social reproduction, and resistance. Furthermore, caste power may be extreme at the top, but it takes the whole system of what Ambedkar referred to as "graded inequality" to uphold the hierarchy wherein each one is spiritually and materially sustained by being more ostensibly pure and powerful than those cast as more spiritually and materially polluted in the next rung down—everyone ultimately feeling superior to the Dalit outside caste's fold.

While caste was scripted by Hinduism and originally institutionalized and protected by a Hindu state, over the centuries, caste has infiltrated every religious community in the subcontinent, including those religions and sects formed or drawing conversion out of Hinduism as an escape from caste—Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam, and Christianity. This is why caste is found in communities of every religion on the subcontinent, and their diaspora.

4) How can caste discrimination be eliminated?

As Dalit leaders, theorists, and communities have made clear, caste discrimination is a multi-layered social, cultural, historical phenomenon that is as deeply personal and physiological as it is imaginative, creative, material, and institutional. To eliminate caste discrimination requires an equally complex and multi-layered approach that resists every instance and manifestation of caste apartheid. It stretches from interpersonal relationships that refuse caste boundaries to institutional protections that recognize the specific nature of caste hierarchies and violence within apparently shared categories such as class or religion or race or national origin or ancestry. To eliminate caste discrimination will also require governments and educational institutions at all levels and intergovernmental organizations to ban the practice of caste apartheid in public life with the effect of blocking access to all resources when such practices are evident in effect. Dalit feminist Soundararajan defines caste abolition as the "interconnected political, social, cultural, somatic, spiritual, and economic project of annihilating caste and caste apartheid. Drawing on a legacy of Black and Dalit solidarity, this phrasing intentionally evokes the abolition movement in the United States, linking Black and Dalit

liberation to move us toward an overhauling of society to co-create liberatory futures beyond systems of exclusion and violence” (p. 217). Ultimately, Dalit Bahujan feminists have shown that caste constitutes the deep structure of modern capitalism and colonialities across the planet and conceptions of decolonization, abolition, and liberation have a world to win in this recognition.

This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) resource was developed by Dr. Dia Da Costa (Professor, Educational Policy Studies in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, Brahmin settler) to support the collaborative initiative between the Offices of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at the UAlberta and the UCalgary to raise awareness toward the development of a nondiscrimination policy. For questions about or corrections and additions to this FAQ resource, please contact vpedi@ualberta.ca and vpedi@ucalgary.ca.

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Recent Examples of Changes to Discrimination Policy

[Brown University Adds Caste to Non-discrimination Policy](#)

[Seattle Bans Caste Discrimination](#)

For Further Reading on the Discussion in Canada on Caste-Based Discrimination

[Caste Matters · South Asian Canadian Heritage](#)

[How prejudice rooted in an ancient social system has migrated from India to Canada | Radio-Canada](#)

[Caste in Canada: The Unheard Stories of Dalit Canadians \(2020-23\) | Anne Murphy](#)

[How prejudice rooted in an ancient social system has migrated from India to Canada](#)

['We are zero': Immigrant says she can't escape sting of India's caste system, even in Canada | National Post](#)

[Indian caste system in Canada called 'a disease' worse than racism](#)

[Gurpreet Singh: Canada needs to stand up for Dalits | Georgia Straight Vancouver's News & Entertainment Weekly](#)