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How India's caste system manifests in Seattle-area workplaces and beyond

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By [Naomi Ishisaka](#) 

Seattle Times columnist

Maya thought she left caste-based discrimination behind when she came to the U.S. from India to pursue her studies, but she was shocked to discover she was wrong.

Maya is Dalit, the most oppressed caste in India's caste hierarchy. She said when she arrived about 20 years ago, it was a rare thing for a young woman like her to be able to pursue a master's degree, as caste-oppressed people often lack financial resources to do so.

Maya, who asked to use a pseudonym out of fear of retaliation from dominant-caste people for speaking out, now lives in the Washington, D.C., area and works for a Seattle-based tech company. She said she first experienced caste-based discrimination in the U.S. when she arrived as a student and lived in shared apartments with other Indians.

"People would only want to live with roommates from their own caste," she said.

The South Asian caste system that exists today is a hierarchical system dating back thousands of years that originated from Hinduism in India but is practiced now throughout South Asia and among people of [many religions](#). India [technically](#) abolished discrimination based on caste in the 1950s, but it [persists in practice](#). The system's principles assign status based on a belief in purity and pollution. [Brahmins](#), or the priestly caste, are at the top of the hierarchy and Dalit, or "untouchables," at the bottom. As practiced in parts of South Asia, there are [five main castes](#) with thousands of sub-castes. Caste status is assigned by birth.

When Maya tried to get assistantships to help pay for college, the graduating seniors would only recommend people of their own caste to their professors.

She also experienced caste discrimination working in the tech industry. Even though she was doing well in her job, when her dominant-caste manager found out she was Dalit, he began shunning her and ignoring her suggestions and ideas. It got so bad that her colleagues started raising the issue on her behalf.

When she volunteered for a project at work, she said her manager told her, “ ‘You better not touch the project because you’re ill-fated.’ And it might not sound like something major,” she said, “but for us, it completely resonates with the caste and untouchability because not touching is what all of the dominant-caste people have made rules around for so long. That’s why we are called untouchables. We’re not supposed to touch anything or anyone.”

If you’re surprised to learn caste-based discrimination is happening in the U.S., you’re not alone.

The mostly hidden and unjust nature of caste is why Seattle City Councilmember Kshama Sawant [sponsored](#) what would be the first-in-the-nation city ordinance to bar discrimination based on caste. The council is expected to vote on the measure after a rally and more public comment tomorrow. Last week, nearly 60 people testified at a City Council meeting on the measure, many sharing their [personal experience](#) with caste, with all but a handful voicing support for the anti-discrimination measure.

As Sawant, the council’s only socialist member and only Indian American, said in a [news release](#), “Caste discrimination doesn’t only take place in other countries. It is faced by South Asian American and other immigrant working people in their workplaces, including in the tech sector, in Seattle and in cities around the country. ... Caste discrimination occurs in the form of social segregation, economic deprivation, physical and psychological abuse, and violence. Caste discrimination is also manifested in employment, education, and housing.”

Thenmozhi Soundararajan is one of the country’s [leading advocates](#) for Dalit rights and self-determination and for abolishing caste-based oppression. The Dalit author of “[The Trauma of Caste](#)” is the executive director of Dalit civil rights organization Equality Labs. Last year, in a much-publicized incident, a speaking engagement she was scheduled to give at Google News for Dalit History Month was [canceled](#) after complaints from Google workers who called her “anti-Hindu” in emails to the company. The [harassment and abuse](#) after the cancellation were so extreme, she lived in a safe house for a time.

Some argue you don't need to call out caste specifically because other protected statuses would cover it. But Soundararajan recalled something a worker told her, "why would I even report to HR when they probably don't even know where India is on a map?" (Much less, understand the complexity of caste.) Soundararajan said Sawant's measure makes it explicit that discrimination based on caste will not be allowed.

Soundararajan said that while the measure would apply to South Asians, it would also apply to "any community that has an internal minority that is discriminated against based on descent, birth and work." Examples could include the historically oppressed [Roma](#) people or [Barakumin](#) of Japan.

But the measure's [opponents](#), such as the Hindu American Foundation, argue it is unfairly targeting a minority group. In a statement last week, they wrote, "[Sawant] negatively implicates an entire ethnic minority community — people of Indian descent make up less than 2% of the US and Washington state population — in the absence of any verifiable evidence of her claim of widespread discrimination amongst South Asians in the workplace. No other ethnic minority is being similarly targeted or subjected to separate proposed policies that would only apply to their community."

I am sensitive to this argument, as while Indians as a whole make up almost [18%](#) of the world's population, Indian Americans are a small minority in the U.S. Prejudice or bias against any minority group is wrong, period. But Soundararajan said arguments like the ones by the Hindu American Foundation are "rooted in fragility and fear mongering."

"The only people that are impacted by this are people that discriminate or bigots," she said.

Support for the measure is multiracial and multifaith. On Friday, a broad coalition of 140 faith-based, civil rights and social justice organizations signed a [letter of support](#) for the ordinance.

It's important to remind those of us who do not have firsthand experience with the South Asian caste system that while we might be tempted to wag our fingers at such an arbitrary, oppressive and cruel method of determining human worth and value, the U.S. has its own homegrown and entrenched caste system based on race that is equally arbitrary and inhumane.

As Isabel Wilkerson wrote in her groundbreaking [book](#) “Caste: The Origin of Our Discontents,” the “tentacles” of the U.S. racialized caste system reach all corners of our society and affect wealth, employment, housing and education. Here, too, upper-caste fragility is rampant, with the mere [teaching](#) of African American history now seen as threatening to the caste system.

It will take much more than one city ordinance to rid the U.S. of all the manifestations of caste, but we have to start somewhere.

As Maya said, “Caste is an evil that has been practiced for more than 3,000 years now. We carry the genetic trauma of caste for such a long time already. But if we don’t have caste protections, then this is going to affect even the next generations.”

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