

Prejudice, even in pardes

An upper-caste Gujarati family who ran a grocery shop in the US wanted to know the name of the Indian sitting next to them in a private van in Pennsylvania. When his name did not reveal his caste, they probed further and asked for his surname. He said he was South Indian and didn't have a surname.

"I told them I knew why they were asking me these questions. They wanted to know my caste," says Sakya, who told them he was dalit. Over the next few days they sat as far away from him as possible while travelling together. Sakya, a PhD in history, says he has never faced any racial discrimination from white Americans; it's his own countrymen that have discriminated against him.



Education qualifications do little to erase the caste biases that Indians carry with them. A recent survey by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and the University of Maryland, US revealed that one in four Indians continue to practise untouchability in some form in their homes.

It's the same story across continents. The National Post writes of how, for dalits of Canada's British Columbia, the barbs are subtle. "They come in seemingly innocuous questions about your family village or last name...They show up in careless conversation, among friends, behind closed doors. A messy house is referred to as a chamar house."

Indian immigrant Kamlesh Ahir told the newspaper: "It doesn't matter if we are a doctor, teacher, because we belong to the lower castes.... They think we are bulls-t. We are zero....I'm in Canada ... But the bulls-t castes are still here. We live it every day."

"When Hindus move to other countries, the caste system transmigrates with them. Wherever Indians migrate to America, they build temples. They also export a Brahmin priest to perform the rituals in the temple. In this way the same structure repeats itself," says noted dalit scholar Kancha Ilaiah.

While New Jersey has one of the largest Hindu temples in the US, dalit entrepreneur Deelip Mhaske, a prominent member of the Indian community, is never invited to any cultural or religious Hindu function such as Diwali and Holi.

"The dalit gurdwara in Burnaby (British Columbia) was founded in 1982 after dalit worshippers felt unwelcome in an upper-caste gurdwara," writes Cheryl Chan in Canada's National Post. Chan points out the irony of the fact that Sikhism does not officially have a caste system.

A year ago, the British parliament officially outlawed caste discrimination. A UK government study had found evidence of caste-based discrimination at the workplace, in the delivery of services and in the education system. Coventry, a city in Central England, saw one of the most degrading cases of caste discrimination. "An elderly dalit lady was receiving home care from the city council, which would send a council worker to her house to bathe her. One of the council workers happened to be an Indian of a higher caste. When she discovered the lady was dalit, she refused to give her a bath," recalls Lekh Pall, an activist with the Anti-discrimination Alliance.

People often hide their identity as dalits as they do not want to be discriminated against, says Dr Sushant Godghate, a doctorate in engineering who lives in Japan. "I had an Indian colleague in Japan who I knew to be Buddhist (dalit convert). When I asked him if he would like to take part in the Ambedkarite movement in Japan he refused, saying he was not from the community," says Godghate.

Recently an upper-caste Hindu in an office in Japan overheard a dalit colleague talking of organizing protests over the brutal murder of three members of a dalit family in Maharashtra last month, an incident reminiscent of the Khairlanji killings. The dalit colleague says he and the upper-caste Hindu co-worker would earlier hang out together, but after this incident, the upper-caste colleague began to avoid him.

Recent protests in New York over the killings in Maharashtra saw several other groups join in, from African American church groups to Arab artists. However, upper-caste Indians were conspicuous by their absence.

In a paper on Australia's South Asian diaspora, Deakin University researcher Amit Sarwal argues that "despite the modern nature of South Asian diaspora in Australia and despite the egalitarian nature of Australia and even if caste as an institution cannot be practiced publicly or caste consciousness has not survived, this consciousness has very subtly merged into class consciousness and a demonstration of social status in relation to others. The 'others' being those who do not belong to the same jati, linguistic group and economical level..."

When an upper-caste Indian who has grown up in a deeply hierarchical society leaves India, he wants someone to dominate, says Chandra Bhan Prasad, mentor at the Dalit India Chamber of Commerce and Industry. "Africans in Durban say Indians treat them worse than whites do. For them, blacks are like dalits. But in countries like the US, where they have no one else to suppress, they turn on dalits," says Prasad.