

# How caste discrimination impacts communities in Canada

Anne Murphy, Suraj Yengde :  
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Supporters and opponents of a proposed ordinance to add caste to Seattle's anti-discrimination laws gather at City Hall on Feb. 21, 2023. (AP Photo/John Froschauer)

Many perceive caste to be a phenomenon that only exists in India. Yet, it is a part of Canadian society, and an issue that many in South Asian diasporas are contending with.

The late British Columbia-based poet and activist [Mohan Lal Karimpuri](#) described caste as a system of high and low, a form of “social, economic, political, religious inequality” that takes away the power of the many and puts it in the hands of the few. It is the hierarchical ranking of people in accordance with an ascriptive identity, associated with family, lineage and hereditary occupation.

Those who are Dalit, like Karimpuri, are among the most marginalized by dominant castes, and historically systematically excluded in social, economic and cultural terms. Dalits are most vulnerable in India where violence and exclusion remain pervasive. In 2022, Amnesty International stated that “[hate crimes including violence against Dalits and Adivasis \[Indigenous Peoples\] were committed with impunity.](#)”

But caste does not only exist in South Asia. In recent years, it has been formally recognized as a potential grounds for discrimination in the United States and Canada in diverse contexts in places like [Seattle, Wash.](#) and [Burnaby, B.C.](#)

The [Toronto District School Board](#), the [Ontario Human Rights Commission](#), [Harvard University](#) and the [University of California, Davis](#) have recognized casteism as a form of discrimination.

In 2023, California lawmakers passed a bill that would explicitly ban caste discrimination in the state. However, [it was vetoed by Gov. Gavin Newsom](#) who said it was “unnecessary,” arguing that caste discrimination was already banned under existing laws.

To truly understand what caste means and its impact, the stories of those who experience caste discrimination must be heard. All too often, the experiences of those marginalized within the caste system are treated as an addendum or aside to dominant caste narratives, and casteist perspectives persist in the public domain and remain unquestioned.

## Lack of visibility

Caste in Canada project interview with Rashpal Bharwaj.

In 2020, we initiated the [Caste in Canada project](#) in partnership with Dalit civil society leaders in B.C. The project documented the lives of Canadians of Dalit ancestry through in-depth oral history interviews. We interviewed 19 people from an array of backgrounds impacted by caste. Fourteen of these interviews are now available on the project website.

One recurrent theme in the interviews was the issue of visibility. University student Vipasna Nangal, for example, expressed concern about how many Dalits mask their caste identity in Canada as a way of avoiding stigma.

As she notes, “[in order to resist something you have to acknowledge it... and so you can't have resistance without having visibility.](#)” Caste, therefore, is something that needs to be talked about and not hidden. The limitations of masking caste identity are eloquently addressed in the interview with journalist Meera Estrada. She poignantly describes the pain involved in pretending not to be Dalit and her own personal journey towards [publicly acknowledging her identity.](#)

Participants in the project voiced this as a common concern: that only by making the stories of Dalits more visible and accessible can we create domains for the recognition, and then obliteration, of caste and casteism, and the possibility of moving past caste divisions, for all.

## Challenging the social acceptability of casteism

Caste in Canada project interview with Vipasna Nangal.

Another important theme was the need to challenge the social acceptability of casteist discourse. Several participants emphasized the pervasiveness of casteist discourses in popular contexts, such as in music, where dominant caste perspectives are celebrated.

Participant Rashpal Singh Bhardwaj, founder of the Ambedkar International Social Reform Organization (AISRO), [described the organization's work with local radio stations](#) to discourage playing music that celebrates dominant caste identities on the radio.

Caste discrimination is a part of the life experiences of many in Canada, both as a result of experiences in India, but also here in Canada. Participants [Gurpreet Singh](#) and [Kamaljit](#) described how people of South Asian heritage in Canada try to discover each other's caste backgrounds — and the exclusion this entails.

It is, in short, a part of Canadian society, working on multiple levels and complicating our understanding of diversity in the Canadian context.

## Tackling caste

Caste in Canada project interview with Mohan Lal Karimpuri.

Given that caste is a continuing problem both in India and abroad, it is no surprise that Dalit Canadians have organized extensively to address discrimination. In B.C. there are several organizations, such as our project partner, the [Chetna \(“Awareness”\) Association of Canada](#), represented in our interviews by its executive director, [Jai Birdi](#) — who played a key role in the project, and speaks in his interview about how to respond to caste discrimination with [power and resilience](#) — and [Manjit and Surjit Bains](#), Ambedkarite Buddhist activists.

Other important organizations include AISRO and its members [Rashpal Singh Bhardwaj](#), [Jogender Banger](#), and [Kamlesh Ahir](#) whom we interviewed for the project. There is also the [Ambedkarite International Co-ordination Society](#), represented in the project by [Param Kainth](#), who also speaks eloquently about the importance of the teachings of the Buddha for Dalits.

As the titles of these organizations make clear, they are inspired by India's towering leader and architect of the Indian constitution, [B.R. Ambedkar](#), who campaigned for the rights of South Asia's diverse Dalit communities. His life and activism provide the model for millions of Dalits around the world as they seek to remake the world without caste. With the Caste in Canada project, we work with our Dalit colleagues to do the same in Canada.

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