

# Caste Experiences in Ontario

## Preliminary Report of Survey Data





CASTE

EXPERIENCES

IN CANADA

2024-2026

A Community Partnership for Survey Design

# Caste Experiences in Ontario: Preliminary Report of Survey Data

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Co-authored by the members of  
**Caste Experiences in Canada:**  
**A Community Partnership for Research Design (CEC Project).**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report shares some preliminary results of our community-academic research project, a partnership between SADAN (South Asian Dalit Adivasi Network, Canada) and a group of five researchers at Queen's University, Toronto Metropolitan University, University of Toronto, and Carleton University. Together, we developed **the first survey in Canada** on the experiences of caste-based discrimination. The survey was designed through consultation with members of caste-oppressed communities in Ontario who provided crucial insights about the diversity of caste experiences and identified issues around language, accessibility, and safety.

**The Caste Experiences in Ontario Survey** was launched online in April 2025. Eligible respondents were individuals with South Asian ethnic heritage over the age of 16 who have resided in Ontario in the past 10 years. We collected 128 completed surveys from respondents of different religious communities, languages, and nationalities. Approximately 61% of respondents identified their caste background as caste marginalized, and 49 respondents (38%) self-identified as Dalit or caste-oppressed. Some key findings include:

- 49.6% (92% of caste-marginalized respondents) said they had personally experienced caste-based discrimination in Canada, and more than half of this group reported multiple incidents of discrimination
- 43.9% experienced discrimination in the workplace and/or while seeking employment
- 43.9% reported discrimination in schools or educational settings
- 29.8% experienced discrimination while seeking to rent or purchase a home
- 66.7% said they have observed caste-based discrimination against others
- 68.9% said that caste discrimination has impacted their mental health
- 52.6% said that caste discrimination has prevented them from progressing in their career or workplace
- 80% of respondents believe that caste discrimination affects educational and employment opportunities for South Asians in Canada

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) and provincial Human Rights Commissions should provide clear and explicit recognition of caste as a distinct category of discrimination in human rights and equity legislation.
2. Federal and provincial governments, public sector institutions and services, labour unions, and private sector employers should directly address caste-based discrimination in hiring, equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI), and harassment and anti-discrimination policies.
3. School boards and postsecondary institutions should incorporate caste awareness in curricula, policy, and programming to educate students, teacher candidates, staff and administrators on caste discriminatory practices

# INTRODUCTION

## THE URGENT NEED FOR DATA ON CASTE IN CANADA

The movement for protections against caste-based discrimination has grown across the country, but advocates have identified a lack of data about caste-based discrimination in Canada as a significant challenge.

SADAN (South Asian Dalit Adivasi Network, Canada) is a registered not-for-profit organization founded in 2019. SADAN's mission is to advocate for the rights of Dalits, Adivasis, and other caste-oppressed and caste-marginalized communities. Through talks, workshops, and presentations for rights organizations and service providers, the organization fosters critical caste literacy and provides guidance and mentorship to emerging anti-caste activists and scholars engaged in research and community work. SADAN works with diasporic community organizations, educational and government institutions, immigrant service providers, and labour organizations to address caste-based discrimination and stigmatization in Canada.

In March 2023, SADAN led a public campaign in support of a motion before the Toronto District School Board to recognize caste-based discrimination. The TDSB is largest school board in Canada and has many South Asian students, teachers, and employees. The motion, which was passed by the TDSB despite some opposition, acknowledged caste-based discrimination and recommended that the Ontario Human Rights Commission provide guidance on this issue. SADAN led advocacy efforts with the OHRC which subsequently issued a position statement<sup>1</sup> in October 2023. The statement provides a definition of caste and clarifies “people's rights and legal obligations to prevent and address caste-based discrimination under Ontario's Human Rights Code.”

The OHRC statement was a watershed moment for empowering caste-oppressed communities in Canada. The statement reminds institutions, such as workplaces, schools, and service providers, covered under the Human Rights Code, that they are obligated to implement anti-caste discrimination measures, educational programs on caste discrimination, and a develop a complaints mechanism for aggrieved community members to make their claims. While this is an important step towards caste-equity in Canada, anti-caste advocates continue to struggle with the lack of data about caste-oppressed communities and their experiences of discrimination. Anti-caste advocates often face challenges from Hindu organizations who claim that caste is not an issue in Canada, and this was a significant issue in the TDSB campaign.

We know that caste-based discrimination is real, and we need to make this reality visible to policymakers.

The **Caste Experiences in Canada** project has addressed this challenge by bringing SADAN together in partnership with research experts on the South Asian diaspora, caste and religion, to develop a survey about caste discrimination in Ontario. The aim of our survey was to capture information about how caste-marginalized people experience discrimination.

1 <https://www3.ohrc.on.ca/en/news-center/ohrcs-policy-position-caste-based-discrimination>



## A Community Partnership for Survey Design

Over the last several years, there has been an emerging collection of qualitative data about caste in the South Asian diaspora in Canada. Through the work of academics and community groups conducting individual interviews; new media coverage; posts on social media; and testimonies at hearings and public events. This data is incredibly valuable as it shows us the ways that people experience, talk about, and challenge casteism in their daily lives. However, these stories do not give us a sense of how widespread the problem of casteism is around the country. The objectives of our project were to:

- Design and develop a new survey instrument in consultation with communities that can be used to sensitively gather data about caste identities and practices.
- Center community knowledge, experiences, and needs to better inform academic and public understandings of caste in the South Asian diaspora.

This survey was the first of its kind conducted in Canada to gather data about caste-based identities and practices across South Asian diasporic communities. Our community-centred process of designing and developing the survey, with consideration to the complexity of South Asian identities and the reluctance to discuss caste, was a breakthrough in advancing knowledge creation about caste in the diaspora.



# UNDERSTANDING CASTE IN CANADA

## What is caste?

The Ontario Human Rights Commission provides the following definition:

A caste system is a social stratification or hierarchy that determines a person or group's social class or standing, rooted in their ancestry and underlying notions of "purity" and "pollution." It is a traditional practice based in the political, social, cultural and economic structures of some cultural or religious communities and the societies in which it is practised<sup>2</sup>.

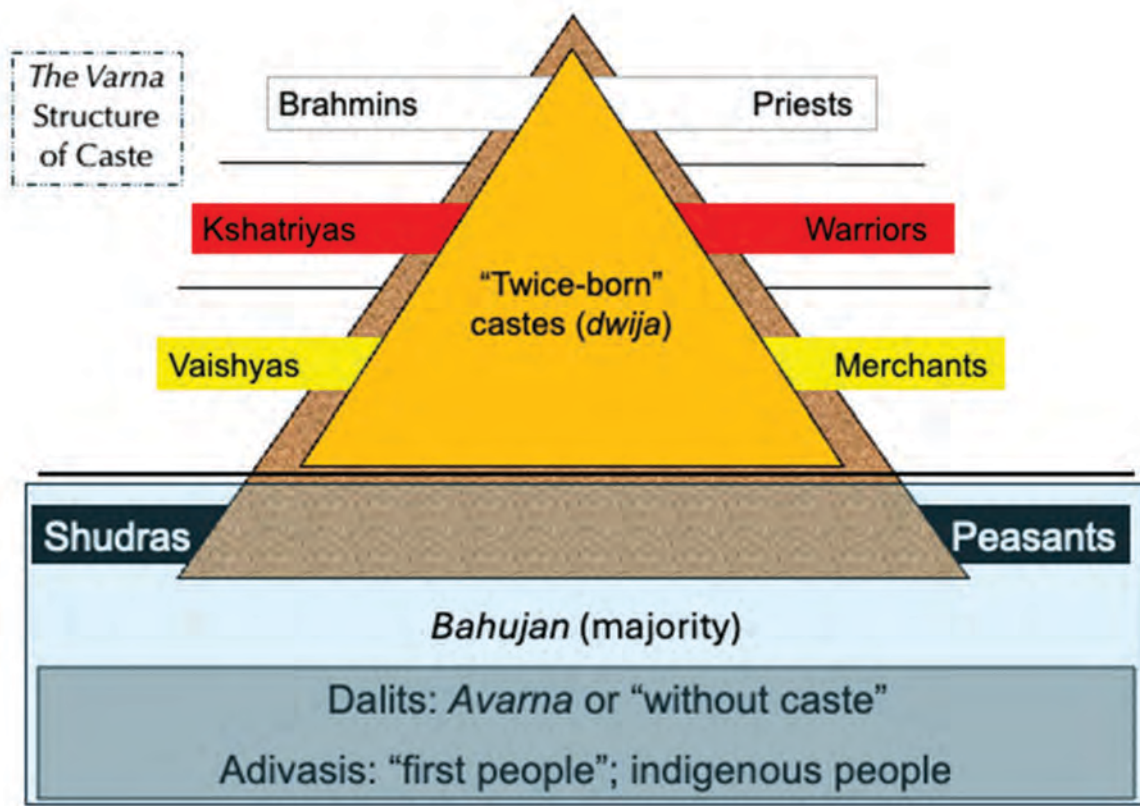
Traditions of hierarchical 'hereditary occupation' (sometimes called *jati*) exist across South Asian communities and are complicated by regional, cultural, religious, and linguistic variations. The most common element across South Asian practices of caste is that the "lowest" castes (we use the term **caste-oppressed**) are considered 'polluted' by others and are often associated with 'unclean' forms of labour such as handling the dead, refuse, human waste, soil, and animals. Those in the 'upper caste' groups (we use the term **dominant-caste**) avoid even accidentally touching caste-oppressed people, because the interaction would cause them to also become 'polluted'. For this reason, caste-oppressed people were once called 'untouchable' in English. More recently, many have adopted the term **Dalit**—derived from a Sanskrit word for 'ground-down'—as a reclaimed term of self-assertion and dignity. There are also other 'lower' caste groups known as Sudras that are considered 'touchable' yet still experience many forms of prejudice and discrimination. We refer to these groups as **caste-marginalized**<sup>3</sup>.

Caste is further complicated by its intersections with class. For example, some caste groups falling in the middle of the caste hierarchy may be socially dominant in a particular region, accumulating land and wealth, and therefore might be called dominant-caste, even if they are not at the top of the caste hierarchy. Meanwhile, even though individuals with caste-marginalized heritage may achieve success in their education and career, they might still be subject to social stigma and discrimination.

The concept of **varna** (the concept of four hierarchical social groups that appears in the ancient Vedas) is the earliest known model of caste in South Asia and is still connected with some Hindu religious practices today. However, caste prejudices exist among other religious communities also, such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Sikhism, even when their religious traditions do not support the idea of caste. This is evidenced by discrimination against Dalits and lower castes who converted to these other traditions. Among members of all these religious communities, those with inherited caste privilege are often most reluctant to acknowledge the continued impact of caste prejudice.

2 <https://www3.ohrc.on.ca/en/news-center/ohrcs-policy-position-caste-based-discrimination>

3 In India, these groups are often called Bahujan or majority, since together, caste-marginalized groups make up more than half the population. There are many other regional terms for caste-oppressed and caste-marginalized people.



## Caste and Diaspora

Among South Asia's diverse religious and ethnic groups, people with oppressed-caste ancestry have been the most vocal about caste's persistence, while those who might benefit from caste privilege seem reluctant to acknowledge it. But Dalit and caste-marginalized South Asians have always been a part of the diaspora. When immigration policies in the UK, the US, Canada, and Australia lifted restrictions on Asians in the 1960s, Dalits were among the many South Asian professionals who emigrated. Various accounts of this wave of Dalit diasporic communities describe they kept in touch with each other 'underground', while concealing their caste identities from fellow Indians<sup>4</sup>, for fear of being 'rejected from South Asian religious and cultural life'<sup>5</sup>.

Dalit diasporic networks became more extensive and diffuse starting in the 1990s and began mobilizing against caste-based discrimination. Associations such as the Dr. Ambedkar International Mission in Canada and the US, the South Asian Dalit and Adivasi Network (SADAN) in Canada, and Equality Labs in the US also organize community events for Ambedkar Jayanti and Dalit History Month celebrations and lobby against caste-based discrimination in the diaspora. Simultaneously, digital networks of Dalits have contributed to further creating transnational dialogues between Dalit youth and activists and contributed to consciousness raising and advocacy against caste discrimination<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Adur & Narayan, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Zwick-Maitreyi et al., 2018, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Nayar, 2014.

## Caste-based discrimination in Canada

South Asians represent the largest visible minority in Canada, and students from South Asia (particularly India) make up the majority of international students in Canadian postsecondary institutions<sup>7</sup>. Research has examined the experiences of South Asians through an equity, diversity, and inclusion framework<sup>8</sup> but this attention has rarely extended to caste and caste-based discrimination. Testimonies from caste-oppressed migrants reveal how caste continues to influence dignity, community belonging, and life, operating across borders and shaping the lived experiences of South Asian migrants in their new host countries<sup>9</sup>. Across the country, there are increasing efforts to acknowledge caste-based discrimination. In June 2023, the city council of Brampton, Ontario, home to one of the largest South Asian diasporas in the world, unanimously passed a motion to recognize caste as a category protected from discrimination, two months after a historic motion passed by the city of Burnaby, BC, another city with a large South Asian population, passed such a motion. In 2023, the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal ruled in favour of a victim of caste-based discrimination, and three Canadian municipalities approved statements acknowledging caste-based discrimination.

## Discrimination in educational settings

In 2023, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) became the first school board in Canada to formally recognize caste discrimination as an issue affecting students and took a step toward banning it<sup>10</sup>. Board trustee Yalini Rajakulasingham reported receiving multiple emails describing caste-based harassment in schools, where caste-oppressed students were subjected to caste slurs and derogatory comments after their caste identity became known. A college student also recounted experiencing repeated bullying in Greater Toronto schools in the form of comments about her dark complexion, non-vegetarian food practices, and her identity as a Dalit Christian, reflecting how caste discrimination intersects with food practices and perceptions of skin colour<sup>11</sup>. Parents reported similarly; a classmate told one parent's daughter that they could not be friends because of her caste identity<sup>12</sup>. Painful experiences of prejudice at a young age suggest that greater awareness and education about caste are necessary within Canadian schools.

As South Asian students, framed as a homogenous group in Canada, make up a significant population in the Canadian higher education institutions and among the international students, the voices of Dalit and other caste-marginalized students are even more important. When they finally enter international higher education spaces, Dalit students further experience caste discrimination through both covert and overt ways. Their experiences in diaspora show how last names often signal caste identity, where they are asked about their surnames by peers who want to determine their caste background<sup>13</sup>. Caste-oppressed

7 CBIE, 2023.

8 Mandell et al., 2022; Poolokasingham et al., 2014

9 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/indian-caste-system-in-canada-called-a-disease-worse-than-racism-1.3090441>

10 Singh, 2023.

11 Jidugu, 2024; Kumar, 2023.

12 Bowden, 2023.



students are also ostracised in housing arrangements because of non-vegetarian food practices that dominant caste peers consider impure or taboo<sup>14</sup>. Oral narratives reveal how casteism impacts both the domestic and international Dalit students in colleges, housing, workplaces and universities.

Anti-caste student groups, organizing on campuses and in Canadian community, have been advocating for inclusion of caste protections, educating the student community and administration, and creating spaces to speak about and challenge casteism. In 2024, University of Toronto recognized caste as a protected category in the collective agreement with its graduate workers union (CUPE 3902). In the year, the Queen's University's graduate workers union (PSAC 901) added caste as a ground for discrimination to their anti-harassment statement, and in 2025, Queen's University recognized caste-based discrimination as a workplace issue in a Letter of Agreement with PSAC 901, becoming the only two universities in Canada to include protections against caste discrimination at a policy level<sup>15</sup>.

## Discrimination in workplaces and community spaces

Caste-based discrimination has also been reported within Canadian workplaces, though the lack of defined policies has been a deterrent to addressing incidences of discrimination such as the use of casteist slurs, social exclusion and favoritism within the workplace<sup>16</sup>. In March 2023, the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal ruled in favour of a Dalit taxi driver who claimed that his dominant-caste co-workers harassed him at work by calling him slurs, and physical altercations including threats of death<sup>17</sup>. In 2015, a veterinarian in BC also reported to the CBC that despite his education and occupation, he still faced casteist slurs and prejudices at his workplace and within community spaces.

More broadly, South Asians in Canada have described feeling marginalized by caste prejudice in community settings, especially when negative stereotypes about oppressed-caste communities seem to be used casually within informal gatherings<sup>18</sup>.

## International efforts to challenge caste

Caste-based discrimination is being recognized as a social issue around the world. In the UK, two government-commissioned reports (2010 and 2013) acknowledged the existence of caste discrimination and recommended changes to the 2010 Equality Act, though these changes have not yet been made. The US-based anti-caste organization Equality Labs conducted a caste-survey that relied on self-reported data, and uncovered narratives of caste discrimination among diasporic South Asians<sup>19</sup>. There has also been a growing movement of universities across the US adding caste protections to their equity and non-discrimination

13 Choudhary, 2023.

14 Bowden, 2023.

15 Caste is a labour issue.

<https://en.themooknayak.com/education/queens-university-recognizes-caste-based-discrimination-in-historic-agreement-with-psac-901>

16 <https://www.baaznews.org/p/seattle-caste-ban-celebrate>

17 B.C. Human Rights Tribunal awards man more than \$9K in case of caste-based discrimination

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/caste-discrimination-taxi-decision-1.6783267>

18 <https://www.refinery29.com/en-ca/2021/12/10700243/indian-caste-system-in-canada-real-experience>

policies. In February 2023, the city of Seattle became the first US city to ban caste-based discrimination<sup>20</sup>. The state of California passed similar legislation in 2023, but the bill was later vetoed by the governor after extensive lobbying by Hindu right-wing organizations. In 2022, caste-oppressed communities and academics in Australia brought caste-based discrimination to the attention of the Australian Human Rights Commission, which led to it being recognised as “an inter-sectional form of discrimination” by the Australian Human Rights Commission<sup>21</sup>.



**Caste Experiences in Canada launch at Dalit History Month event, April 2025.**

19 [Zwick-Maitreyi et al., 2018]

20 <https://www.baaznews.org/p/seattle-caste-ban-celebrate>

21 <https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-10/An%20Anti-Racism%20Framework%20Community%20Consultations%20Report.pdf>



# METHODOLOGY

## Focus of the survey

This survey was planned from the outset to focus on the experiences of caste-oppressed and caste-marginalized people and allies. Our community-academic research partnership prioritized three values in developing our survey:

1. Community members should be engaged at each step of the process so that they feel that the survey questions and recruitment strategies truly reflect their needs and concerns.
2. Recruitment of survey respondents should primarily focus on Dalit, caste-oppressed, and caste-marginalized communities in Ontario.
3. The results of the survey should be freely available, and the dataset will be accessible to anyone who might find it helpful for community advocacy efforts.

## Survey design

Our first community consultation took place in September 2024 in Toronto. Representatives from caste-oppressed communities and organizations shared their experiences and discussed what kinds of information they hoped to gather from their communities in order to advocate for caste-equity measures. Community members largely agreed that a survey could provide useful data and could provide insights into how caste practices and discrimination manifest within their communities. They also emphasized the need to account for the diversity of caste practices within different linguistic, religious, and national communities. We were especially fortunate to receive guidance and support from Professor Arun Gautam, a well-known and highly respected senior leader in the community who shared a proposal for a survey design and encouraged us to develop questions about caste-based exclusion in specific spaces, such as religious institutions.

Between September 2024 and February 2025, we held further meetings and reached out to other groups. Our team members attended community events and visited places of worship to talk about the survey project and invite feedback about our strategy and the design of questions. These consultations highlighted considerations of accessibility. For instance, community members felt strongly that the survey should not be too long or impinge on respondents' time. Some members were concerned that a survey in English language only might exclude certain members of the community from being able to meaningfully respond. Many requested that it should be easy to complete on a phone. An interesting proposition was to enable respondents to record their answers to open-ended questions in their preferred language, instead of typing out their answers in English. With technical support, we were able to create an option for voice recording with some limitations, but it was not utilized by respondents.

The survey was designed in REDCap, an opensource platform that is used widely in healthcare and university research. This platform provided the most options for security from potential attacks on the survey with spam messages, false completions, completions, or DDOS (Denial

of Service) attempts. To address these concerns, prospective respondents were first asked to enter an email address and agree to the Informed Consent statement in order to receive a link to the survey. Email addresses were kept separately and confidentially and were deleted after 30 days. The research team only received and worked with anonymized data.

The survey design was approved by the Queen's University Research Ethics Board in March 2025. We asked 38 questions, divided into four sections: 1) Demographic Information, 2) Personal Experiences of Caste Discrimination, 3) Discrimination in the Community, and 4) Personal Reflections. Most questions were presented with a scaled response, or with the option to choose all applicable options. There were eight opportunities to write or record additional reflections.

## Survey mobilization

The survey was launched on April 13, 2025, coinciding with Dalit History Month Event and Ambedkar Jayanthi, at an event hosted by SADAN. We officially closed the survey on August 31st, 2025.

Research field assistants and volunteers shared information about the survey at community events and places of worship throughout the summer. Paper versions of the survey were made available for those who might not feel comfortable with the online platform, and volunteers supported their completion.

In total, there were 234 unique attempts at the survey. We collected 11 paper surveys in addition to 223 online attempts. Of the 223 online attempts, we had 117 completed online surveys—meaning that respondents clicked the final button at the end of the survey reconfirming their informed consent and participation. In total, we identified 128 completed surveys. Completion does not mean that every question was answered. Only the initial eligibility questions were mandatory. All other questions were optional, and some parts of the survey were triggered by responses to the previous question.

The 52% completion rate may indicate that the two-stage design survey may have proved onerous for some users. Second, some users may have been dissuaded by the length of the survey and may not have returned to complete their response. It is also possible that some incomplete surveys are the result of critics examining the survey language but declining to participate. These are all issues that we will need to address in future surveys.



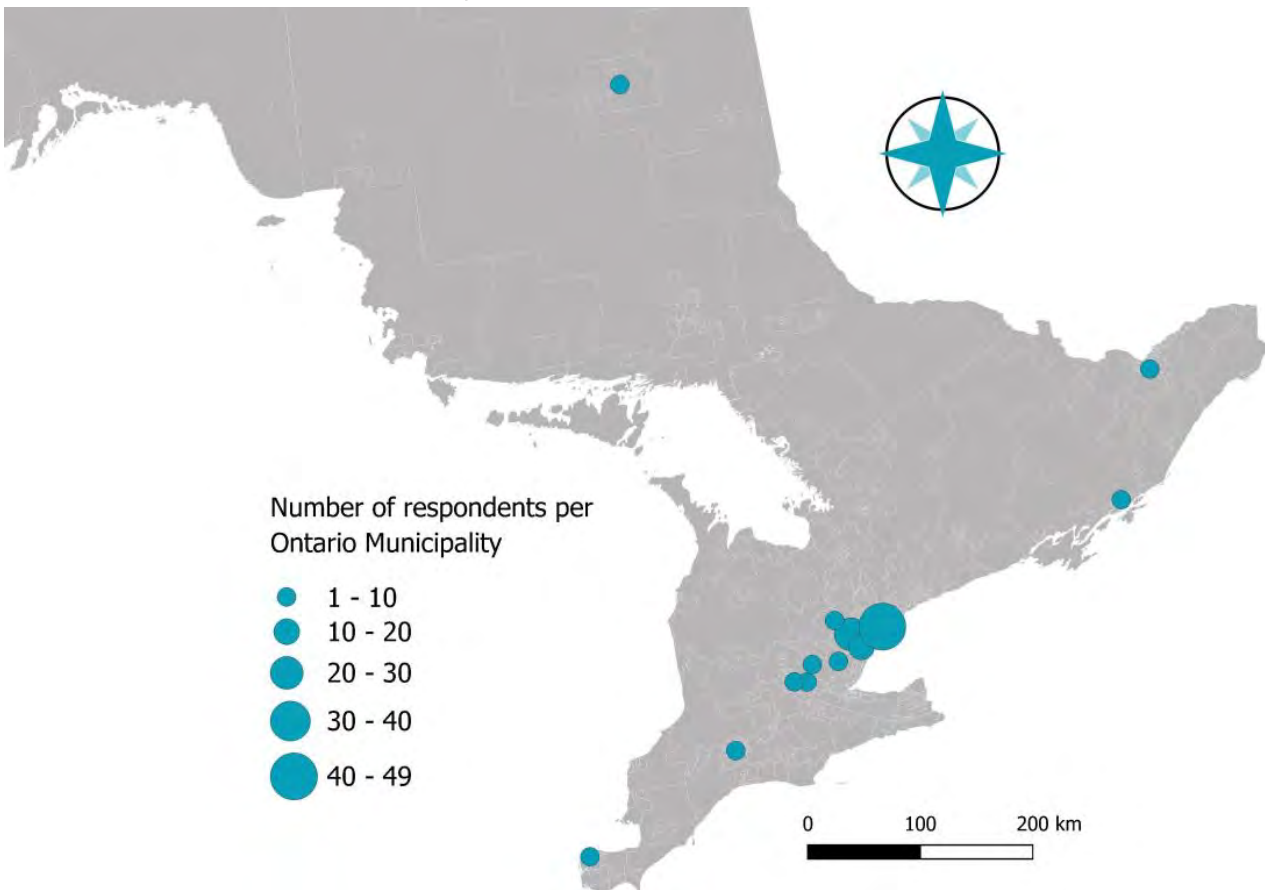
**SADAN volunteers doing community mobilization**

# CASTE EXPERIENCES IN ONTARIO

## SURVEY ANALYSIS

### Demographic overview

We asked respondents to confirm residency in Ontario presently, or at any time in the last ten years. To capture their locations while protecting anonymity, we asked each person to share the first three letters of their postal code or the name of their town or city. Most respondents were in the Greater Toronto Metropolitan area.



### Gender, age, and immigration

Of the 128 respondents, 69 (55.2%) identified as men, and 54 identified as women. Two identified as non-binary and one chose 'other' without specifying another term.

The majority of respondents were between the ages of 30-49. About 26% were between the ages of 16-29. Another 29 respondents were above the age of 50, including 6 over the age of 70. We did not invite responses from individuals below the age of 16. 32% of respondents came to Canada in the last 5 years, while 38% had been living in Canada for more than 10 years.

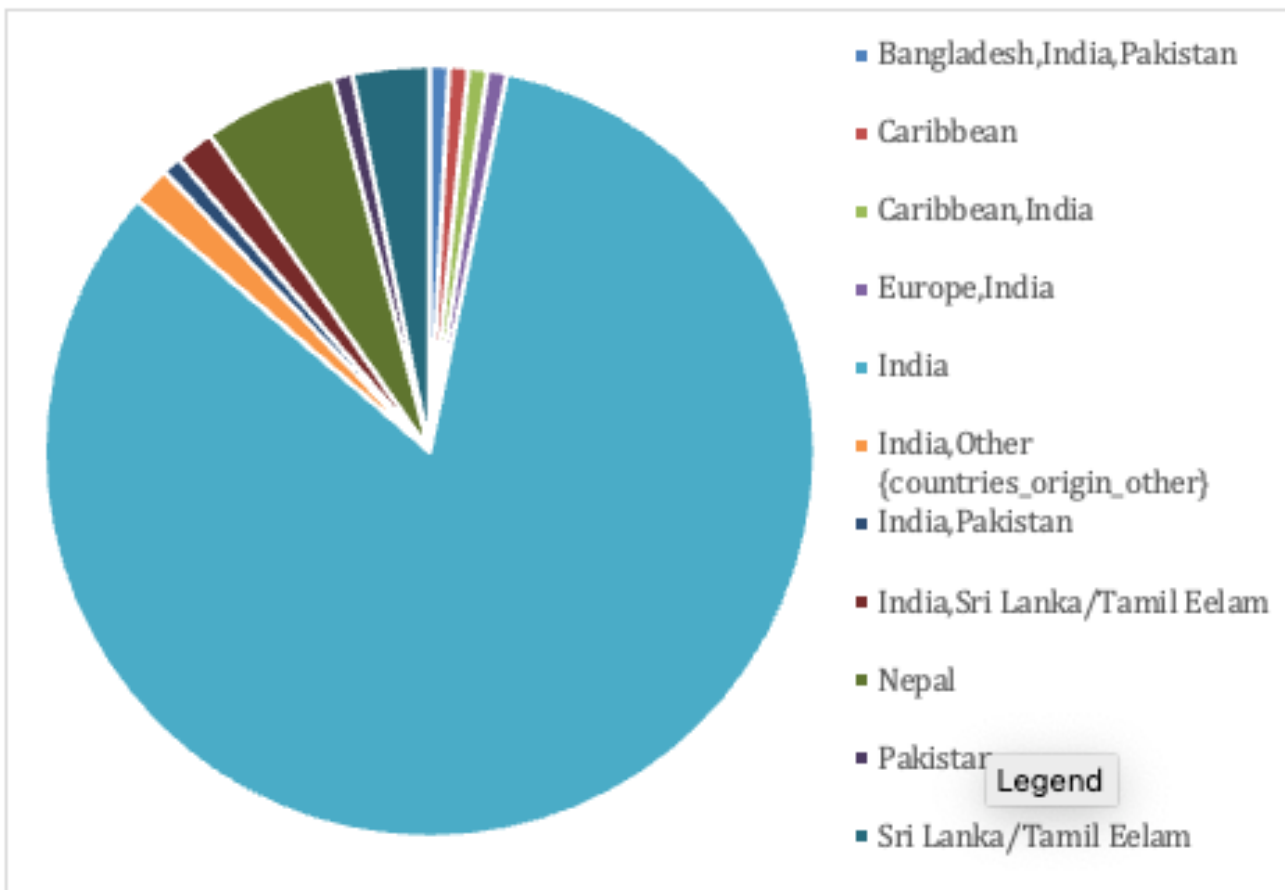
### Occupation

Most respondents, nearly 75%, indicated that they are currently employed, and 21% are employed in government, education, and social services. About 15% were students. Other respondents indicated that they are caregivers, retirees, or unemployed.

## Ethnic and national origins

We asked respondents to share information about their ethnicity and origin. Only two participants identified as not having South Asian heritage, one of whom selected another racialized group.

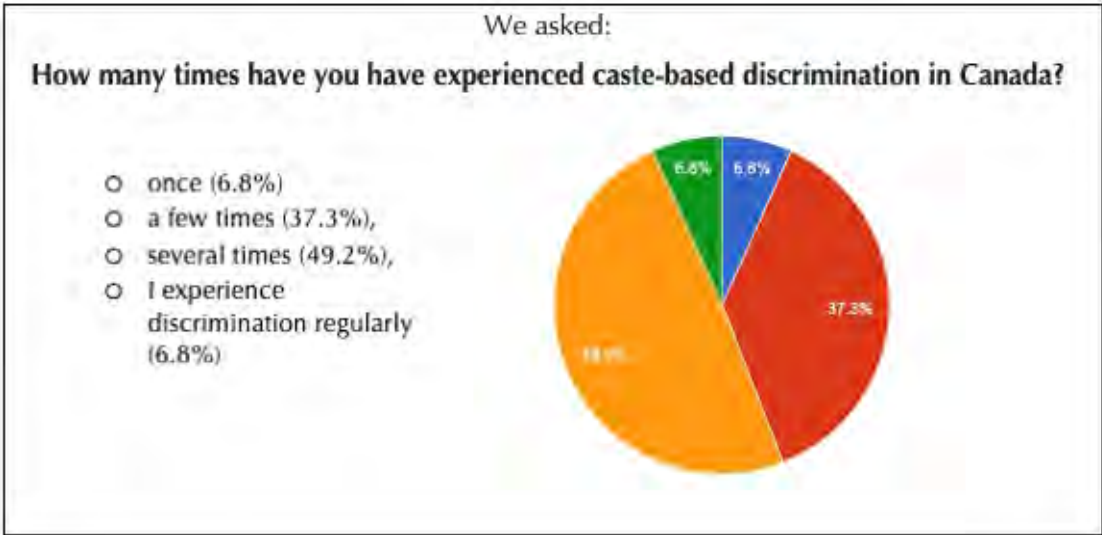
- Respondents from across religious communities participated: 34% of respondents identified as Hindu, 22% as Buddhist, and 21% as Ravidassia Sikhs. 22% of respondents identified as practitioners of Dalit and Adivasi traditions. More than half of respondents said they were practicing members of these communities.
- Respondents spoke a variety of South Asian languages, with the majority reporting that they speak Hindi (70%), Punjabi (37%) and Tamil (27%).
- The majority of respondents, 89.5%, said that their families had ancestry in India. About 15% identified origins in Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Caribbean. Many respondents reported more than one country of origin.





### Key findings: where and how discrimination is experienced

- 49.6% of respondents (92% of those who identified as caste-marginalized) said they had personally experienced caste-based discrimination in Canada. More than half of these reported multiple incidents of discrimination.
  - 43.9% of these respondents experienced discrimination in the workplace and/or while seeking employment
  - 43.9% experienced discrimination in schools and educational settings
  - 29.8% experienced discrimination while seeking housing (rental or purchase)
  - 38.6% experienced discrimination in dating, friendships, marital alliances
  - 34.5% experienced social exclusion or segregation (eg, served with different food or utensils at a gathering)
  - 29.8% experienced discrimination in religious spaces (eg temples, mosques, churches, gurdwaras, etc.)
  - 68.9% said that caste discrimination has had an impact on their mental health
  - 52.6% said that caste discrimination has prevented them from progressing in their career or workplace



- 66.7% of all respondents reported observing caste-based discrimination against other people.
- 80.0% of all respondents believe that caste discrimination affects educational and employment opportunities for South Asians in Canada
- 64.7% of all respondents agreed with the statement “Caste affects social interactions and relationships among South Asians in Canada”
- 86.7% agreed with the statement “Caste discrimination impacts how South Asians interact with other communities in Canada”
- 22.2% of all respondents said that caste has “very much” affected their sense of their sense of belonging in Canada.

## STORIES FROM RESPONDENTS: HOW EXPERIENCES OF CASTE IMPACT EVERYDAY LIFE

In the section below, we have identified some of the key themes that emerged in our review of respondents' comments to the open-ended questions in the survey. We have directly quoted respondents throughout, with minor edits for clarity and readability and to eliminate any potentially identifying information.

Responses in the survey reflect perceptions about how structures of caste privilege have traveled to Canada. One dominant-caste respondent acknowledged that “caste privilege has given [them] opportunities”, and another noted that “their high caste last name gained” automatic respect.

### “Caste privilege has given me more opportunities.”

- “It’s [a] very common practice in Indian community, people with upper caste always use or glorify their last name.”
- “My last name indicates my high caste status which means I get automatic respect that I did not really earn. It’s like I am a part of a club that I have no idea about but others do and somehow think I am more deserving.”
- “Most of the Indians who migrated here long ago were upper caste people who had maintained hegemony over wealth and education for decades, establishing themselves in positions of privilege through historical advantage and social connections.”
- “[I] asked my mom what ‘jatt’ means and she was surprised that I knew about this; she explained it wasn’t important here and that there are specific teachings in Sikhi that make it so caste should not dictate who we hang out with or not. I also learned that my elders were taught to be very proud to be jatt... so there are contradictions galore.”

### “I came to Canada thinking I would be free from caste, but it has taken a new form here.”

In contrast to these perceptions about privilege, many respondents shared how the stigma of caste travelled with them. Their responses show that caste continues to shape social lives and opportunities, challenging the expectation that migration would free them from caste oppression.

- “[C]asteism is very much prevalent in Canada.”
- “Caste-based discrimination, though often hidden, exists within South Asian communities in Canada and can affect employment, education, housing, and social inclusion.”
- “People continue to hold the same caste biases that they have in India even after moving to Canada. So looking down upon Dalits is quite common”



- “As someone from a Dalit background, I have seen and experienced social exclusion, disrespect, and discrimination, both subtle and direct. These biases are deeply rooted in history and still affect access to education, employment, and even basic social dignity. While things are slowly changing, caste-based inequality continues to influence daily life.”

At the same time, one Dalit respondent noted that the Canadian context is comparatively less oppressive, offering some relief from the intense discrimination experienced in India:

- “Even though these prejudices persist in the diaspora, I still find the social environment in Canada more relaxed and tolerant compared to India. I no longer have to live under the daily burden of Brahminical caste-based oppression.”

### “Subtle biases persist” in Canada

Several respondents pointed to ways that caste often operates quietly, through seemingly innocuous socio-religious norms, symbols, or practices that mark out differences.

- “Though the discrimination is less overt compared to India, subtle biases persist, making it harder at times to feel fully included or accepted. This has somewhat affected my sense of belonging, particularly within diaspora circles where caste consciousness continues to influence social relationships.”
- “While Canada promotes multiculturalism and equality, caste-based attitudes can still surface within South Asian communities here. Social interactions, especially around marriage, religious gatherings, or cultural events, sometimes reflect underlying caste preferences or exclusions.”
- Some practices don't directly attack anyone but quietly establish superiority in society. I can offer a simple example: Brahmins wear a sacred thread around their upper body to signify they are “twice-born” and of a superior caste. On the surface, this appears to be a religious practice, but it actually serves as a way of signaling to others that they are superior to other Hindus. In public places like swimming pools, displaying the sacred thread isn't merely religious expression-it's an assertion of religious and caste superiority.”



## **Anti-Caste Social Reformers in India**

**From left: Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, Gurrām Jashuva, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar,  
Sree Narayana Guru, Jyotiba Phule, Fatima Sheikh, Birsa Munda,  
Savitribai Phule**



## Denial and discrimination in housing: “very silent practices such as denial of housing”

Access to housing and experiences within residential spaces are shaped by caste, with everyday practices reinforcing caste norms and reproducing discrimination against caste-oppressed individuals. Several respondents spoke of experiencing caste discrimination from landlords, roommates, neighbors, and within apartment complexes, often through practices that determine who is allowed to rent, share space, or feel at home.

Experiences of caste-based discrimination in housing reported here include being denied rooms outright by landlords, encountering rental listings that specify acceptable caste backgrounds, or rental agreements being broken after a person's caste was identified.

In shared residential settings, respondents were directly asked about their caste, restricted from displaying religious or cultural symbols, or subjected to surveillance and verbal casteist abuse. A respondent also noted the interlocking operation of caste and class within neighbourhoods, where social exclusion and conflict reflected underlying differences in caste hierarchy and housing status. These experiences point to how caste operates in housing through both explicit exclusion and subtle, normalized practices that regulate access, belonging, and safety.

- “I have experienced caste discrimination at my place of residence from roommates, people I have travelled with, people at work”
- “One of my friends was indirectly denied housing which was almost fixed, but when owner came to know about caste, they made excuse”
- “Didn't get room because of caste, casual casteism by non-Dalits”
- “In communal spaces in the apartment complex, people who practice caste culture believe it is appropriate to ask about my caste”
- “I have experienced caste discrimination at my place of residence from roommates”
- “There are lots of rental advertisements that ask for a specific background”
- “A neighbour calling the police on another neighbour for a perceived bylaw infraction and blaming his behaviour on his caste as a lower-caste Punjabi
- “people in my neighbourhood not wanting to rent their basement to anyone of a low Punjabi caste”
- “I was discriminated on the basis of my food choices. The upper caste roommate called me impure because of I was eating meat.”
- “[A] Brahmin woman refused to give me a room in her house because she's vegetarian.”

## Exclusion and exploitation in public spaces: “In [my] workplace, Dalit laborers received significantly lower wages for the same work and were treated unfairly.”

- “In professional life, I am aware of caste networks being useful to gain opportunities and people from the same region and caste grouping providing others with opportunities. I have not received this kind of opportunity and do not have such a network or people of my specific identity to draw on in the sector in which I work.”
- “While canvassing door-to-door during [an] election campaign, a Sikh woman told [me] directly that they would not vote for a “Chamar Dalit.”
- “[In a job interview] he asked me what’s your last name then he said ohh I didn’t get it can you tell from which caste you belong to?”
- In [my] workplace, Dalit laborers received significantly lower wages for the same work and were treated unfairly.”
- “We are called chamars as a verbal taunt and discriminatory slur [at work].”
- “Once Dalit workers’ caste identities are revealed, they are often socially excluded. Co-workers avoid sitting with them or sharing meals during breaks.”
- “Cultural organizations do not address the ‘caste’ question during South Asian events. The cultural space is overwhelmingly savarna. Those who question the caste-dimensions of these festivals are ostracized.”
- “I was in mall with my school friends, one of my friends picked a t-shirt, other girl said, “these kind of colors are for chamars, not for us” and laughed.”

## Caste in educational spaces: “Caste should not dictate who we hang out with”

- “I am “Jatt” (landowning caste) Punjabi. I first became aware of my caste in Grade 10 at high school from a Punjabi peer who asked me my last name and who said I am worth hanging out with because I am a jatt like him.”
- “We face conscious and unconscious bias during vivas, assignments, exams etc.”
- “My ex-professor, who was an upper caste, discriminated against me due to my caste status and my project and denied providing any letter of recommendations for me. These gatekeeping measures, if not addressed, can only help in sustenance of caste discrimination.”
- “During my PhD, I have closely observed that the University system also operates this way, There is virtually no Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi representation either at faculty-level or even in terms of the curriculum that is taught in departments that work on South Asian context.”



## Religion, caste, culture and social relationships: “the first thing they ask indirectly is which temple we visit”

Respondents reveal a complex and often critical relationship between religion and caste, with many rejecting casteist-religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices. Respondents also highlighted how caste location shaped religious experience, with some noting contradictions between state-assigned religious identity, lived caste status, and access to social or religious privilege based on the caste status. This portrays an overarching view that caste-based hierarchy is incompatible with respondents' ethical, political, or spiritual values.

- “The so called upper caste people don't prefer to mingle with Dalits like they won't be invited in family puja, ceremonies, even if invited they will have separate area to eat.”
- “At my own wedding, I saw family members ensuring that the ceremony is performed and 'in contact' with only people from the dominant caste. Although this consideration was ultimately removed by me and my partner, we saw the initial hesitation”
- “My teenage cousin's girlfriend who were high school sweethearts were forced to breakup by the girl's parents when they came to know about caste.”
- “I feel South Asian notions of 'date in your culture, stay in community' are all driven by Caste - and that has caused a lot of mental pressure growing up in an immigrant home.”
- “People in Sikhism keep saying they do not believe in Caste system but majority of them are hypocrites. Try asking for a groom for your sister or for a woman's hand as a man from my caste.”
- Several Dalit Muslim respondents drew connections between casteism and Islamophobia both in Canada and India. Respondents observed:
- “Rampant Islamophobia and calling us names and slurs. And even untouchability at times. Not willing to share food with us. Or not wanting to marry us.”
- “I have witnessed behaviours that are exclusionary, oppressive, racist and sexist toward christians, dalits, muslims, and other groups.”
- “A caste-privileged person [has been] complaining about library displays about [Dalit] heritage month at [the] public library; this same individual has complained about Muslim and Sikh displays in other public spaces as well”

## “I was dirty and low to touch but at the same time freely touched and abused”: the intersectionality of caste, sexuality and gender experience

Women across the caste hierarchy experience gender-based violence, abuse, and misogyny, but it is crucial to recognize the different and often exponentially magnified harms experienced by caste-oppressed women and gender diverse people. For queer, non-binary, and “third gender” people from caste-oppressed communities, the intersections of caste and

heteronormativity are highly complex, and can lead to isolation, exile, and abuse. Queer respondents expressed feeling marginalized among other queer South Asians:

- "I am a Dalit queer woman and I have always been scared to seek friendships with other Indians in Canada for fear of judgment and discrimination. I miss having cultural ties here, but I haven't been able to trust any Indian immigrant with my personal life in my 4 years of living in Canada"
- "[I was seen as someone who carries milk around (often as gendered abuse) because of our pastoralist roots ...I was dirty and low to touch but at the same time freely touched and abused for two decades in rural and urban spaces."
- "People who learn to look [at the] Indian subcontinent through the eyes of a caste dominant person [will have] casteist views on Dalits and adivasis. This even extends to





# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE TOWARDS CASTE-EQUITY

The data from the Caste Experiences in Ontario Survey clearly shows the impact of caste discrimination on members of our communities. We call upon political leaders, policymakers, employers, and educators across Canada to take action against caste-based discrimination.

1. The Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) and provincial Human Rights Commissions should provide clear and explicit recognition of caste as a distinct category of discrimination in human rights and equity legislation.
2. Federal and provincial governments, public sector institutions and services, labour unions, and private sector employers should directly address caste-based discrimination in hiring, equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI), and harassment and anti-discrimination policies.
3. School boards and postsecondary institutions should incorporate caste awareness in curricula, policy, and programming to educate students, teacher candidates, staff and administrators on caste discriminatory practices.
4. Because surnames are often used to identify caste, governments, institutions, and employers at all levels must acknowledge diverse forms of naming, modes of addressing and identification, and ensure accessibility and dignity to caste oppressed individuals especially those who have single names.
5. Statistics Canada should develop a strategy for the voluntary collection of data about caste in South Asian origin communities.
6. Governments and institutions should recognise the festivals/ traditions and events of caste-oppressed people such as Dalit History Month and Dr. Ambedkar Jayanthi (Birth Anniversary) as part of multiculturalism initiatives.
7. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion policies should acknowledge that words such as "Pariah" and "Chamar" are casteist slurs and should not be used by people outside these communities.
8. All programs, professional training and practice in human resources, mental health services, counselling and student support, and social work should incorporate education on caste.
9. Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada should formally recognize caste as a ground of discrimination within refugee and immigration processes and require caste awareness trainings for the decision makers to ensure fair and caste sensitive assessment of caste oppressed applicants.

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# TDSB to vote on making caste a protected category

Motion to recognize this form of discrimination would be first of its kind in Canadian schools

UDAY BANU

The Toronto District School Board is set to vote on a motion that would include caste as a protected category, alongside race, gender, sexual orientation and other identities. If passed, the motion would be the first of its kind in Canadian schools.



Sanah Khan, 11, of Upper Canada Village, says she has friends who are Dalits. She says she has never heard of caste discrimination in Canada.

## Caste-based discrimination now recognized by Ontario Human Rights Commission

The OHRC said its goal is to prevent discrimination based on a mostly South Asian practice of assigning one's social status at birth.

Volume 105, No. 10, February 19, 2022



Protesters gathered in front of the Ontario Human Rights Commission in Toronto to demand that the commission recognize caste-based discrimination and sexual orientation.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) has officially recognized caste as a basis of discrimination under the province's Human Rights Code.

In a move seen as a landmark, the OHRC said its goal is to recognize the rights and legal obligations of individuals in order to prevent discrimination based on caste — a mostly South Asian practice of assigning one's social status at birth.

The statement comes seven months after the Toronto District School Board voted to refer to the OHRC to provide a framework regarding oppression related to caste systems within public education. The statement outlines what the caste system is and its impacts on life, before explaining what the Human Rights Code covers and its limitations.

There are also limits to the code. Specifically, protection is restricted to "housing, accommodation, employment, vocational associations and contracts" — something Puli worries about, as he reports instances of customer or tenant harassment throughout the GTA.

According to the statement, school boards also have an obligation to protect students and school community members under Ontario's Education Act and the Provincial Code of Conduct for the education sector.

"Hate activities targeted at a particular group may be a violation of Canada's Criminal Code," the statement said.

It is his organization's mission "to continue advocating and educating the Canadian community about the caste system, discrimination within it, and how to address all aspects of it," he said.



## Toronto 'I came here to escape': Toronto tackles caste-based discrimination in schools

Activists hopeful as Canada's largest school district takes first step towards banning caste discrimination

Olivia Bowdler in Toronto

When Vijay Puli arrived in Toronto with his wife and baby daughter, he thought they had finally left behind the discrimination, violence and social rejection they had faced in India.

Puli identifies as a Dalit, a member of a group who in India are considered to be at the very bottom rung, often deemed "untouchable".

In India, the caste system has long dictated social, religious and economic hierarchies, despite officially being abolished in 1950.

And just a month after moving to Canada in 2006, Puli realized that caste prejudices persist there too.

At south Asian functions in Toronto, there were constant questions about which exact village his family came from. Jokes, slurs and stereotypes about Dalits were rampant, and he would often hear people blame Dalits for crimes in India, including rape and murder, he said.

"I came here to escape ... but it happened here too. It's very painful," he said.

Even at his daughter's Toronto school, there was caste-related bullying. She could not be friends due to her caste, said Puli.

Asian Dalit Adivasi Network

SECTION 16 | FEBRUARY 19, 2022 | TORONTO STAR

COLOMBIA Hippo harm  
Altered ecosystem, animal killed on highway part of EcoBar's legacy IN2

SECOND WORLD WAR Farm girls  
As war raged on, young women ensured our food supply IN2

# INSIGHT

Historic vote recognizing this prejudice shines light on the practice — here, in India and beyond

## CASTE IN CANADA



Sanah Khan, 11, of Upper Canada Village, says she has friends who are Dalits. She says she has never heard of caste discrimination in Canada.

The group says that adding caste to the list of protected identities in the Human Rights Code (the code system has roots in Hinduism but exists in other communities.)

"There is little evidence or reports of 'caste oppression' in Toronto and for that matter Canada," states the petition, which has more than 5,000 signatures.

"Here the declaration that there is no documented anti-caste discrimination in the diaspora, including in Toronto, makes the motion misleading, prejudiced and lacking in integrity," Ms. Rajaratnam says.

Ms. Rajaratnam, who is Hindu, said she was confused by the allegation that the motion was targeting the Hindu faith. She said the motion did not single out any faith, but that it affected South Asian, African and Caribbean groups.

Jaganjit Sandhu, a Brampton resident and board member of the World Sikh Organization, said that caste is a reality in all South Asian communities. Some

questioned that the vote was a 2017 vote, not a 2022 vote, after finding that he had been a member of the board.

"I'm not sure if it's been updated by the board," said Puli. "I'm not sure if it's been updated by the board."

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# Caste now recognized in Ontario rights code

## Protections will extend to housing, jobs and contracts

REANNA JULIEN  
STAFF REPORTER

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) has officially recognized caste as a basis of discrimination under the province's Human Rights Code.

In a press release last week, the OHRC said its goal is to recognize the rights and legal obligation of individuals in order to prevent discrimination based on caste — a mostly South Asian practice of assigning one's social status at birth.

The statement comes seven months after the Toronto District School Board voted in favour of asking the OHRC to provide a framework navigating oppression related to the caste system within public education.

The statement outlines what the caste system is and its impacts on life, before explaining what the Human Rights Code covers and its limitations. Although the recognition is a major step for those within the Dalit community, a group deemed outside of (or beneath) the four-tiered system, some say there's still a long way to go.

Vijay Puli is the executive director of the South Asian Dalit Adivasi Network, an organization advocating for Dalit rights in Canada. He said the news has been a long time coming for the community. As a Dalit himself, Puli said that this new level of protection is one of the best things he can give his children.

"With the constant caste discrimination, we have a long way to go," he said.

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## Doctors want review of how drug won approval

Health Canada got flawed evidence about blood medication detoprons, MDs allege

RACHEL MENDLSON

Dr. Anand Datta — "I had the best health regime in my life."

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## No one's going to want to let go

By [Name]

"I had the best health regime in my life."

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## I won a birth lottery. Here are the lessons I've learned since

By [Name]

"I had the best health regime in my life."

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"I had the best health regime in my life."



Dalit History Month Canada

Tribute to Adivasi Leader & Freedom Fighter **Birsa Munda** on his Birth Anniversary

Caste Experiences In Canada

#DALIT LIVES MATTER

SMASH BIRHMANICAL PATRIARCHY

Mahatma Phule  
Savitribai Jyotirba Phule

Caste Experiences In Canada

E.V. Ramasami Periyar

**sadan** South Asian Dalit Adivasi Network, Canada  
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