

Issue of Caste in America and Elsewhere - An Overview

What is the issue?

- A lawsuit has been filed in California against Cisco Systems for allowing caste discrimination against a Dalit Indian-origin employee. Click [here](#) to know more
- In this context, here is an overview of the issue of caste in America and elsewhere, outside the Indian subcontinent.

What were the earlier references to 'caste' in America?

- In 1913, A K Mozumdar, an immigrant from Bengal to Washington, applied to become an American citizen.
- US citizenship at the time was determined by race, and given only to whites.
- Mozumdar argued that as a “high-caste Hindu” of “Aryan descent”, he shared racial origins with Caucasians.
- His application was accepted and he became the first South Asian American to become a US citizen.
- In 1923, a similar argument that claimed caste was a way to whiteness was put forward by Bhagat Singh Thind.
- Thind was a Sikh writer who had served in the US Army during World War I.
- In his petition, he argued that he was technically “white”, given his “pure Aryan blood”.
- He argued that the high-caste Hindoo “regards the aboriginal Indian Mongoloid in the same manner as the American regards the “Negro”, speaking from a matrimonial standpoint”.
- [Hindoo was a blanket term used then for all Indian immigrants.]
- Thind’s arguments were rejected in the US Supreme Court.
- It decided that he was not white, and hence not eligible for citizenship.
- A few months later, Mozumdar became the first Indian to lose his citizenship as a consequence of that judgment.

What happened after 1965?

- The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act came into place as a result of the civil rights campaign in the US.
- The Act overturned restrictions of race and colour.
- It thus allowed a whole generation of Indian skilled labour (mostly upper-

caste) to be a part of the American dream.

- But importantly, soon, many “lower-caste” Indians also followed.
- [This was significantly because they accessed educational opportunities in technical institutions via reservations at home.]
- With this, Dalit discrimination started in the US.
- One such example is of the REC Warangal-educated Sujatha Gidla.
- Gidla's 2017 book ‘Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India’, was published in the US to great acclaim.
- In New York, she recalls facing discrimination from many Indians.
- Gidla recounts, a Brahmin bank cashier “wouldn’t accept money from my hands. She would demand that I place it on the counter.”

What was the 2015 California textbook debate?

- In 2015, the California board of education asked scholars to help it come up with a framework for history and social science textbooks.
- It was part of a regular evaluation.
- Following that, there was a bitter contest over several aspects of Indian history.
- This included caste and the critique of caste embedded in religions such as Buddhism and Sikhism as well.
- The suggestions of the South Asian Histories for All Coalition (SAHFAC), a collective of scholars and historians, were met with opposition.
- The Hindu American Foundation and other Hindu groups mainly objected.
- They opposed narratives that portrayed “Hindu civilisation” negatively, and warned they might lead to the bullying of Hindu children.
- However, the SAHFAC objected to -
 - i. altering contentious portions of Indian history relating to caste atrocities
 - ii. the attempt to erase the word “Dalit” from history textbooks as demanded
 - iii. the attempt, allegedly, to portray Muslims as oppressors

How prevalent is caste discrimination in the U.S.?

- While the stories of Dalit families are compelling, there is no data about caste in the U.S, and this is a drawback.
- So, in 2018, Equality Labs (an advocacy group for the “caste-oppressed” in California) carried out a survey to fill this gap.
- It surveyed South Asian-Americans on their experience of caste.
- It showed that 67% of Dalits faced caste discrimination at the workplace, 40% in schools, and 40% at temples.
- [That report was cited in the present lawsuit filed against Cisco Systems.]

Is anti-caste movement possible in the U.S.?

- An anti-caste movement taking root in the US is practically hard.
- Notably, of Indian immigrants, 90% are Brahmins and 1.5% are Dalits.
- Indians in America are a minority, and Dalits among them are a minority.
- Issues of such a tiny community making a big enough impact to be called a movement is less likely.
- However, a Dalit consciousness has been present in the US from the 1970s or 1980s, away from the bright lights of media activism.
- People have resisted in private and in public in their own ways.
- Even hiding one's caste is a way of fighting caste as Yengde (who works with community-based Ambedkarite organisations in the US) says.

What was the Dalits' demand for the 2001 UN Conference against Racism?

- The UN Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance was held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001.
- In the lead-up to the conference, Dalit groups had demanded that the conference also take a stand against the "hidden apartheid" in India.
- Since the 1990s, these groups had had some success in lobbying international organisations on caste.
- The universal language and promise of human rights was used to broaden the framework to see the discrimination.
- Specifically, the definition of racial discrimination as "exclusion based on race, colour and descent" was used to acknowledge caste.
- Notably, in 1999, a report by Human Rights Watch, 'Broken People: Caste Violence against India's Untouchables', focussed international attention on the issue.

What was India's stance at the Conference?

- Omar Abdullah, then India's Minister of State for External Affairs said at the conference, the following:
 - a. We are firmly of the view that the issue of caste is not an appropriate subject for discussion at this conference.
 - b. We are here to ensure that states do not condone or encourage regressive social attitudes.
 - c. We are not here to engage in social engineering within member states.

What are the conflicting views in this regard?

- Indian government's position has consistently been that caste should not be equated with race.
- It opines that caste should not be raised in committees that deal with race.

- Caste is an issue that India has been trying to address through constitutional measures.
- So, it does not deny caste, but believes that the issue of race should not get diluted by confusing it with other discriminations.
- On the other hand, Dalits argue that tackling caste needed much more than framing constitutional provisions and legislation.
- The attempt at the conference was to raise a global consensus, to legitimise anti-caste ideologies.
- The Indian government took a position that it needed no interference from the UN. But Dalits view it not as an interference.
- They assert that the UN was only pushing to collectively uphold the value that all humans, irrespective of caste, are equal, and some measures are to be taken for that.
- Strongly opposing the move by Dalit activists and groups, Indian government insisted that caste and race are two dissimilar and anomalous entities.
- But given the anti-apartheid position and programme of affirmative action, these conflicting views and the events at Durban were an embarrassment for India.
- These are just glimpses of the close to two decades' efforts at various levels to get institutions overseas to recognise the 'peculiar challenge of caste'.
- This system of inequality and oppression that is unique to the Indian subcontinent evidently finds reflections in varied forms elsewhere too.
- It has a long way to go before its presence is acknowledged and protections offered to the oppressed.

Source: The Indian Express