

Caste and Migration:
A Study of Indian Diaspora and Inequality

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The Indian caste system is a deeply entrenched social hierarchy that has shaped Indian society for centuries. Dividing individuals into ranked categories determined by birth, caste intersects with other social markers such as religion, language, and gender, influencing access to opportunity and social mobility (Deshpande, 2010). Although rooted in the Indian subcontinent, the caste system's influence now extends globally, including within the Indian diaspora in the United States. Across four major waves of Indian migration, individuals from various caste backgrounds have sought opportunities abroad. However, lower-caste Indians have been largely excluded due to systemic barriers present both in India and within diaspora communities. This paper examines how caste has shaped Indian migration to the U.S., influenced the structure of the diaspora, and perpetuated inequality for lower-caste individuals.

The caste system is deeply embedded in Indian history, dividing society into four primary groups or varnas: Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and artisans), and Shudras (laborers and service providers). Beneath these groups are the Dalits, or "untouchables," who have been historically marginalized and excluded from the formal caste hierarchy (Deshpande, 2010). This rigid system governs nearly every aspect of life, including education, occupation, and social interactions. Vedic texts from the Hindu tradition, often interpreted by Brahmins, have historically reinforced this hierarchy and legitimized its structure (Deshpande, 2010). Social practices such as segregated housing, restrictions on inter-caste dining, and prohibitions on inter-caste marriage further solidify these divisions (BBC News, 2019). Although India legally abolished caste discrimination through constitutional provisions in 1950, its social and cultural legacy persists. Discrimination, exclusion, and violence against Dalits remain widespread. Many continue to face barriers to education, economic opportunities, and even basic dignity. These systemic inequities have pushed some lower-caste Indians to seek refuge abroad, though migration opportunities have historically been accessible primarily to upper-caste individuals who benefit from greater access to resources and education.

Labor shortages in railway construction and agricultural industries drove the first wave of Indian migration to the U.S. Many migrants, particularly Sikhs from Punjab, worked as farmers in California's Imperial Valley (Asian American Education Project, n.d. 1). Although explicit caste documentation was limited, the agricultural expertise associated with the dominant Jat caste suggests they may have been significantly represented in this wave. Jats, a socially and economically powerful caste in Punjab, traditionally own and work land and carry significant

social influence in rural communities. Even though their roles in America were often limited to manual labor, their caste standing in India afforded them advantages and resources that Dalits lacked (Judge, 61). Many Jat migrants settled in California, where their farming experience helped them adapt quickly to the local environment. In India, knowledge of agriculture typically reflects either land ownership or extensive agricultural labor, both of which are associated with higher-status castes in Punjab. This supports the inference that many early Sikh settlers in the U.S. came from upper-caste backgrounds whose agricultural expertise helped them establish themselves economically (Asian American Education Project, n.d., 2–3).

Early Indian migration to America also occurred during the colonial period, with migrants primarily working in railway construction and the lumber industry (Motwani 1993). While many came as laborers, the types of work available often aligned with hereditary occupational castes in India, suggesting caste-linked patterns even without explicit documentation. Although caste was rarely recorded in migration records, reasonable inferences can be made based on agricultural and labor specializations. Overall, available historical patterns suggest that this early migration likely reflected the experiences of upper-caste Indians, reinforcing caste-based disparities within the diaspora. Many narratives celebrating early Indian contributions to America highlight these upper-caste migrants, while lower-caste Indians continued to face systemic barriers that limited their ability to migrate. Dalits and other marginalized castes remained excluded from these opportunities due to persistent inequities in India (Chakravorty et al., 2016).

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 marked a major turning point, facilitating the migration of highly skilled professionals. This wave consisted largely of upper-caste individuals who benefited from India's post-independence investments in education. The Act helped generate the second major wave of Indian migration to the United States. Graduates from prestigious institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) pursued careers in specialized fields such as medicine, engineering, and academia (Kumar, 2023). These migrants were predominantly from higher-caste backgrounds and were the “beneficiaries of post-independence Indian government-funded quality education” (Kumar, 2023). They were able to take advantage of liberalized U.S. visa requirements designed for highly skilled and qualified workers. In contrast, educational attainment among lower-caste Indians remained unequal,

limiting their ability to access these opportunities. Those who were able to obtain higher education and stable employment in India were the ones positioned to migrate to America.

Upper-caste Indians have come to dominate the international job market, particularly in the United States. A large share of Indian migrants arrive through the H-1B visa program, a temporary visa designed for highly skilled foreign workers. In 2021, 74% of all H-1B visas were granted to Indian nationals, most of whom held advanced degrees and specialized skills (Hoffman & Batalova, 2021). Because lower-caste Indians face persistent barriers to quality education and high-status employment in India, those who qualify for the H-1B program tend to come from upper-caste backgrounds. Limited access to educational and professional pathways prevents many lower-caste individuals from competing for positions that would allow them to migrate through programs like H-1B. As a result, this visa channel primarily enabled upper-caste Indians to migrate to the United States.

Educational inequities in India excluded lower-caste individuals from these migration opportunities. Data from 1983 to 2000 shows that only 4% of Dalits completed higher education, compared to significant gains among upper castes (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008). The lack of access to quality education and professional pathways highlights the systemic barriers facing Dalits. Historically, Dalits were denied education to limit their upward mobility and reinforce the social divide between upper and lower castes (Fraser, 2010). While upper-caste Indians accessed new opportunities abroad, lower-caste individuals in India continued to struggle for their rights. The Dalit movement was gaining momentum around the same time the 1965 Act was passed, mobilizing against the rigid caste system (Adur & Narayan, 2017). However, Dalits were unable to benefit from U.S. immigration policies due to persistent educational and economic disadvantages. The Act laid the groundwork for the next migration wave, in which many highly educated upper-caste Indians came to work in the growing tech sector. As upper-caste Indians migrated abroad, lower-caste individuals became increasingly underrepresented in international migration. The second wave reinforced upper-caste dominance in the U.S. diaspora and helped shape its perception as highly educated and financially successful, while lower-caste Indians continued to face limited opportunities at home.

The 1990s tech boom saw a surge of Indian immigrants, predominantly upper-caste professionals, migrating to Silicon Valley and other technology hubs (Jangam, 2016). The

American tech sector had a strong demand for workers in software, engineering, and cybersecurity, prompting many highly educated Indians to move overseas to fill these roles. Most entered through the H-1B visa program, which has long been dominated by highly skilled Indian workers. This wave contributed to the emergence of the “model minority” narrative. Educated migrants working in tech earned high salaries, shifting public perceptions of Indians from laborers to professionals, or in Singhvi’s words, “from coolie-to-coolie millionaires” (2002).

Education patterns in India help explain which castes were represented in this wave: working in the tech industry requires advanced training, and upper-caste individuals have historically had the greatest access to such education. Persistent educational inequities prevent many lower-caste individuals from gaining the qualifications needed for specialized international work programs. For example, while 74% of all H-1B visas in 2021 were granted to Indian nationals, existing research on educational access in India suggests that many of these migrants were likely from upper-caste backgrounds (Hoffman & Batalova, 2022). As a result, upper-caste Indians were more likely to apply for and benefit from these opportunities. This wave further reinforced the narrative of Indians as a “model minority,” highlighting professional success while obscuring the ongoing underrepresentation and struggles of lower-caste Indians both in India and across the diaspora.

A new wave of migration has emerged, and while U.S. border data does not record caste identity, reports of caste-based violence in India suggest that some migrants may be fleeing such discrimination. Unlike previous waves dominated by professionals, this group consists largely of asylum seekers escaping systemic discrimination and threats in India (Bhardawaj, 2024). Indians now represent one of the largest groups of extra-hemispheric migrants arriving at the U.S. border, second only to migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean (Gill & Puri, 2024). This rise in asylum migration is directly influenced by the ongoing challenges faced by lower-caste communities in India. Dalits, in particular, continue to experience widespread inequality and violence. Numerous accounts illustrate these conditions, such as the case of S. Kumar described in Adur and Narayan’s 2017 study: Kumar’s teacher, who belonged to a higher caste, refused to accept that a Dalit child could have good calligraphy and reportedly “put pens between his fingers and squeezed them to alter the shape of his fingers,” demonstrating how deeply entrenched discrimination remains (Adur & Narayan, 2017). Dalits face pervasive inequalities that undermine their chances of success. Even in schools—where all children should be equal—

caste shapes interactions, exclusion, and social identity. Because caste is socially embedded from birth, children internalize these divisions early, leading to segregation and alienation among students from different caste backgrounds.

In India, children are also taught about caste, which causes many to look down on or avoid their peers. Dalit children in schools are often mistreated very harshly. “They are not allowed to sit at the front of the class, they are not allowed to eat with others, or play with kids from other castes. Very quickly, cliques form, and the Dalits are excluded. They do not know any other way, and their adult life is then deeply impacted” (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021). Caste becomes an underlying basis for judging the worth or character of a person in India. Even if a Dalit has the same opportunities or abilities as an upper caste individual, discrimination continues because they were born a Dalit. As a result of these conditions, it is plausible that some lower-caste Indians undertake dangerous journeys across the world in hopes of gaining asylum in the United States. Many travel through multiple countries with the help of smugglers to reach the U.S. border (Venkatraman, 2024). Reports of caste violence, such as Dalit children being mistreated at school and Dalit farmers facing threats from upper caste neighbors, highlight the severe circumstances that drive this migration (Biswas, 2016).

Despite their efforts to escape caste-based oppression, Dalits continue to face exploitation within the diaspora. A 2021 lawsuit revealed that Dalit laborers had been trafficked to construct a Hindu temple in New Jersey under abusive working conditions, earning only \$1.20 per hour (Al Jazeera, 2021). Cases like this show that caste-based discrimination can transcend national boundaries and continue to affect people even after they migrate in search of safety. The caste system has, in many ways, been reproduced within the United States and now affects the Indian community here as well.

Although caste is not formally recognized in the United States, its influence persists within the Indian diaspora. Community advocacy groups have reported that Dalits in America experience significant levels of caste-based discrimination, including workplace inequities (Soundarajan et al., 2023). Upper-caste Indians have historically dominated migration opportunities, using their resources and educational advantages to become the most visible segment of the diaspora. Lower-caste Indians, on the other hand, remain underrepresented and

often marginalized both in India and abroad. Even though caste is not a formal social category in America, the Indian diaspora has carried this system with it, embedding caste dynamics into community life overseas. These caste contrasts are reflected in the different migration pathways taken by Indians. Those with access to higher education and financial resources in India can migrate to the United States, resulting in an imbalance in caste representation within the diaspora.

The Indian caste system continues to shape migration patterns and social hierarchies within the diaspora. Patterns of educational and economic advantage in India indicate that upper-caste Indians have historically been more likely to access migration pathways, resulting in an imbalanced representation in the United States. Meanwhile, lower-caste Indians continue to face systemic barriers that limit their mobility both in India and abroad. Recognizing caste's ongoing influence is essential for understanding inequality within the diaspora. Policymakers, scholars, and community leaders must acknowledge caste as a transnational issue and work toward measures that protect vulnerable groups. By examining the connections between caste, migration, and social inequality, this paper underscores the need for a more inclusive and equitable understanding of the Indian diaspora.

The Indian caste system continues to influence migration patterns and social hierarchies within the diaspora. Upper-caste Indians have historically dominated migration opportunities, leading to an imbalanced representation in the United States. Lower-caste Indians, however, continue to face systemic barriers that restrict their mobility both in India and abroad. Understanding caste's lasting impact is essential for addressing inequality within the diaspora. Policymakers, scholars, and community leaders must view caste as a transnational issue and work toward protections for vulnerable groups. Examining the intersections of caste, migration, and social inequality shows the need for a more inclusive and equitable understanding of the Indian diaspora.

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