

Dalits take fight to Silicon Valley where India's caste system appears to have thrived

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Whenever Benjamin Kaila, a database administrator who immigrated from India to the United States in 1999, applies for a job at a U.S. tech company, he prays that there are no other Indians during the in-person interview. That's because Kaila is a Dalit, or member of the lowest-ranked castes within India's system of social hierarchy, formerly referred to as "untouchables."

Silicon Valley's diversity issues are well documented: It's still dominated by White and Asian men, and Black and Latino workers remain underrepresented. But for years, as debates about meritocracy raged on, the tech industry's reliance on Indian engineers allowed another type of discrimination to fester. And Dalit engineers like Kaila say U.S. employers aren't equipped to address it.

In more than 100 job interviews for contract work over the past 20 years, Kaila said he got only one job offer when another Indian interviewed him in person. When members of the interview panel have been Indian, Kaila says, he has faced personal questions that seem to be used to suss out whether he's a member of an upper caste, like most of the Indians working in the tech industry.

"They don't bring up caste, but they can easily identify us," Kaila says, rattling off all of the ways he can be outed as potentially being Dalit, including the fact that he has darker skin.

The legacy of discrimination from the Indian caste system is rarely discussed as a factor in Silicon Valley's persistent diversity problems. Decades of tech industry labor practices, such as recruiting candidates from a small cohort of top schools or relying on the H-1B visa system for highly skilled workers, have shaped the racial demographics of its technical workforce. Despite that fact, Dalit engineers and advocates say that tech companies don't understand caste bias and have not explicitly prohibited caste-based discrimination.

In recent years, however, the Dalit rights movement has grown increasingly global, including advocating for change in corporate America. In June, California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing filed a landmark suit against Cisco and two of its former engineering managers, both upper-caste Indians, for discriminating against a Dalit engineer.

After the lawsuit was announced, Equality Labs, a nonprofit advocacy group for Dalit rights, received complaints about caste bias from nearly 260 U.S. tech workers in three weeks, reported

through the group's website or in emails to individual staffers. Allegations included caste-based slurs and jokes, bullying, discriminatory hiring practices, bias in peer reviews, and sexual harassment, said executive director Thenmozhi Soundararajan. The highest number of claims were from workers at Facebook (33), followed by Cisco (24), Google (20), Microsoft (18), IBM (17) and Amazon (14). The companies all said they don't tolerate discrimination.

And a group of 30 female Indian engineers who are members of the Dalit caste and work for Google, Apple, Microsoft, Cisco and other tech companies say they have faced caste bias inside the U.S. tech sector, according to a statement shared exclusively with The Washington Post.

The women, who shared the statement on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation, argue that networks of engineers from the dominant castes have replicated the patterns of bias within the United States by favoring their peers in hiring, referrals and performance reviews.

"We also have had to weather demeaning insults to our background and that we have achieved our jobs solely due to affirmative action. It is exhausting," they wrote. "We are good at our jobs and we are good engineers. We are role models for our community and we want to continue to work in our jobs. But it is unfair for us to continue in hostile workplaces, without protections from caste discrimination."

The tech industry has grown increasingly dependent on Indian workers. According to the State Department, the United States has issued more than 1.7 million H-1B visas since 2009, 65 percent of which have gone to people of Indian nationality. Close to 70% of H-1B visa holders work in the tech industry, up from less than 40% in 2003, says David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute.

Devesh Kapur, a professor of South Asian studies at Johns Hopkins University, found that in 2003, only 1.5 percent of Indian immigrants in the United States were Dalits or members of the lower-ranked castes.

The lawsuit, which was initially filed in federal court before being refiled in October in state court in Santa Clara County, where Cisco is headquartered, alleges that Cisco violated the California Fair Employment and Housing Act, which prohibits employment discrimination based on race, religion, national origin, and ancestry. It also sues out against the discrimination they allege, says Soundararajan from Equality Labs, which is conducting a formal survey to follow-up on the claims they received this summer.

"Just like racism, casteism is alive in America and in the tech sector," said Seattle-based Microsoft engineer Raghav Kaushik, who was born into a dominant caste but who has been involved in advocacy work for years. "What is happening at Cisco is not a one-off thing; it's indicative of a much larger phenomenon."

In a statement, Cisco spokesperson Robyn Blum said: "Cisco is committed to an inclusive workplace for all. We have robust processes to report and investigate concerns raised by employees which were followed in this case dating back to 2016, and have determined we were fully in compliance with all laws as well as our own policies. Cisco will vigorously defend itself against the allegations made in this complaint."

Dalit engineers said that most Indian workers from upper castes do not seem aware of their caste privilege and believe caste bias is a thing of the past, despite the fact that high-profile tech CEOs and board members, such as Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella and Amazon board member Indra Nooyi, the former CEO of Pepsi, are Brahmins, or members of the highest caste.

In a statement, Facebook spokesperson Nneka Norville said: “To build services for the whole world, we need a diverse and inclusive workplace. We train managers to understand the issues team members from different backgrounds may face and have courses to help employees counter unconscious bias.”

Apple spokesperson Rachel Tulley said: “At Apple, we are dedicated to providing employees with a workplace where they feel safe, respected, and inspired to do their best work. We have strict policies that prohibit any discrimination or harassment, including based on caste, and we provide training for all employees to ensure our policies are upheld.”

Google spokesperson Jennifer Rodstrom said: “Our policies prohibit harassment and discrimination in the workplace. We investigate any allegations and take firm action against employees who violate our policies.”

Microsoft spokesperson Frank X. Shaw said there are no official complaints of caste bias at Microsoft in the United States. IBM and Amazon declined to comment. (Amazon chief executive Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

Caste is often discovered through questions, not always through appearance. (Although Dalits may have a darker complexion, skin color is not synonymous with caste.) Questions about whether someone is a vegetarian, where they grew up, what religion they practice or who they married may be used as a “caste locator,” seven Indian engineers working in the United States said in interviews with The Post, unrelated to the statement shared by 30 female Indian engineers.

Other tests include patting an Indian man on the back to see whether he is wearing a “sacred thread” worn by some Brahmins, the highest-ranked caste. (This gesture is sometimes referred to as the “Tam-Bram pat,” in reference to Tamil-speaking Brahmins.)

Internal Microsoft emails from 2006 obtained by The Post indicate that caste bias is a long-standing problem within the industry. That year, after the Indian government announced affirmative action measures for marginalized castes, a debate broke out on a company thread about whether the bar was being lowered for Dalit candidates and about their inherent intelligence and work ethic. HR intervened but only to temporarily shut down the thread.

No employees faced consequences for expressing bias against Dalits, according to Kaushik and Prashant Nema, currently a performance and capacity engineer at Facebook, who worked at Microsoft at the time. Shaw said Microsoft encourages and facilitates dialogue and feedback from all employees but declined to comment on the specifics of the 2006 thread.

“If anything, it’s probably gotten worse” since then because of the election of Narendra Modi as prime minister, whose administration has tried to roll back protections for Dalits, Kaushik says.

“A lot of the previously repressed ideas, now South Asians feel more emboldened to say it out loud.”

Recent discussion threads about the Cisco case on the anonymous app Blind show tech workers raising the same questions about Dalit engineers in 2020.

In the Cisco suit, the complainant, an Indian engineer identified as John Doe, alleges he was paid less and denied opportunities because both managers knew he is Dalit. It also claims that Doe faced retaliation after he complained about facing a hostile work environment.

The lawsuit, which was initially filed in federal court before being refiled last week in state court in Santa Clara County, where Cisco is headquartered, alleges that Cisco violated the California Fair Employment and Housing Act, which prohibits employment discrimination based on race, religion, national origin, and ancestry.

If Doe wins, it will be the first major case to prove discrimination against Dalits in the private sector, says Kevin Brown, a law professor at Indiana University at Bloomington, who has been traveling to India and studying the Dalit rights movement for more than 20 years. Brown says the decision would have a clear impact on tech companies’ U.S. operations but also raise the importance of the issue for multinational companies operating in India.

The 30 female engineers are urging their employers, as well as corporate America at large, to include caste as a protected category, so that they feel comfortable reporting this type of bias to human resources. The group includes a few engineers who worked on contract for U.S. tech companies – both in the United States and India through multinational outsourcing companies. However, most of the women are currently tech employees living in the United States.

The female engineers described Indian engineering managers from dominant castes who excluded them from opportunities for promotion, made inappropriate jokes about Dalit and Muslim women and about Dalit reservations (the Indian government’s term for affirmative action), and, in the worst cases, subjected them to sexual harassment.

The Dalit women said they immigrated to the United States hoping to escape bullying and abuse they endured at India’s top engineering schools, where members of the dominant castes questioned their competence as developers. But elite academic centers, such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), also act as a feeder system for tech talent to Silicon Valley.

In the Cisco case, for instance, both John Doe and the manager who outed him graduated from IIT Bombay.

Harvard professor Ajantha Subramanian, author of “The Caste of Merit: Engineering Education in India,” says the IITs have an “outsized influence in U.S. tech culture” through powerful alumni networks that have facilitated the entry of a younger generation into Silicon Valley.

“While caste bias is not unique to the IITs, it is pervasive on the campuses because of widely shared assumptions among upper-caste faculty and students about upper-caste merit and lower-

caste intellectual inferiority,” Subramanian says. “Such assumptions were quite clearly in play in the Cisco case.”

The consequences of being identified as Dalit can also lead to social exclusion by co-workers, even outside the office. One engineer and former contractor for Cisco said he was temporarily removed from a WhatsApp group with other Cisco workers after sharing a news story critical of Brahmin supremacy.

Indian engineers said they did not always trust that Americans would comprehend the power dynamics underlying caste oppression. In interviews, many Indian engineers referenced journalist Isabel Wilkerson’s best-selling new book, “Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents,” which argues that treatment of Black people in the United States is the result of a caste-based hierarchy.

Despite the risks of speaking out, Dalit engineers and their allies have seized on the discussion around historic racism to share their individual observations and experiences about workplace discrimination.

The prevalence of caste bias makes the outcome of the Cisco case more urgent, Microsoft’s Kaushik says. “Then it doesn’t matter what Microsoft thinks, it doesn’t matter what Google thinks, it doesn’t matter what Amazon thinks. They have to pay attention to the law.”