

The Black Indians

Growing up Dalit in the US, finding your roots, fighting for your identity

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Running, passing, hiding. This is the litany of the Dalit American. Growing up in southern California, my family was one of the first Tamil families to immigrate to Los Angeles. Representatives of the Indian brain drain that started in the 1970s, we were part of the first wave of Indian immigrants whose functions, sangams and religious communities helped establish the little India enclave in the now-famous Artesia.

We were also Dalits living underground. Caste exists wherever Indians exist and it manifests itself in a myriad of ways. The Indian diaspora thrives on caste because it is the atom that animates the molecule of their existence. In the face of xenophobia and racism abroad, many become more fundamentalist in their

traditions and caste is part of that reactionary package. So, what does caste look like in the US?

Quite like in India, it is the smooth subtext beneath questions between uncles, like, “Oh! Where is your family from?” It is part of the cliques and divisions within those cultural associations where Indians self-segregate into linguistic and caste associations. It continues when aunties begin to discuss marriage prospects. They cluck their tongues softly, remark about your complexion, and pray for a good match from “our community”.

Many Americans can’t imagine what it looks like to pass. For my family, it was finding clever ways to avoid the ‘jati’ query.

For second-generation NRIs, flashing caste becomes a part of their cultural street cred with other communities. Some do it intentionally to elevate their identity while others operate from a misunderstanding of their own roots and blindly accept the symbols of their culture. Punjabi rappers throw down lyrics about being proud Jats. Tam- Brahms show off their sacred thread, recreate Thiruvayur in Cleveland, and learn Bharatanatyam while using their powerful networks to connect and succeed in the diaspora. Ultimately, we trade and calcify what is seen as proper Indian culture. But hidden within that idea of ‘proper’ lies the code for what is aspirational and ultimately upper caste.

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It’s dangerous, this culture of caste-based intolerance in the diaspora for it extends beyond individual relationships. Individuals build institutions and institutions are steeped in caste. From Hindu temples to gurudwaras, there is a separate yet unspoken policy of worship for those that are Dalit. Furthermore, in the over fifty south Asian and Asian studies departments in North America, there are less than a handful of tenured Dalit faculty. And, crucially, as the Campaign to Stop Funding Hate has shown, NRIs in the US have directly funded and fuelled communal violence in India by supporting cultural and aid programmes that are fronts for local Hindutva organisations.

Through it all, Dalits Run. Pass. Hide.

For while caste is everywhere in the diaspora, there is a damning silence about naming caste. And in the silence there is violence.

I know because my family passed for many years. It was confusing, painful and lonely. We could never truly unpack the memories that my parents fled in India,

nor could we confront the same infrastructure being rebuilt here in the shining land of the American Dream.

Many Americans and Indians can't imagine what it looks like to pass. For my family it was finding ever clever ways to sidestep the 'jati' question, attending temple functions and never speaking about "our community" in public functions ever. We got away with it because there were so few of us in the beginning, and every Tamil was a valuable connection while learning to navigate this new country.

The leverage of our new lifestyle however allowed my family to support Dalit causes back home and work underground through a network of uncles who debated caste issues over phone calls, meetings and conferences. And, of course, while the men were active in this way, the women, like my mom, would pass on Dalit songs and stories holding on to that space—which was important even if we could not share it.

For though it has been almost 100 years since Ambedkar came to study at Columbia University, Dalits like my family are still struggling to find a foothold that is uniquely our own. Unlike other Indians, Dalits do not have their own public institutions within the diaspora. There is no way to go into any city and find and connect with local Dalits unless you are already plugged in to the unofficial Dalit underground communities held together by mailing lists, Facebook groups and phone trees that help us survive the double whammy of racism and casteism.

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I do not know exactly what age I understood I was untouchable, for it was always around me. But I knew exactly when it was that I became a Dalit. It was only when I was 17 and picked up a book about Ambedkar that had grown dusty in our family library that a lightning rod singed my soul. I read his work alongside my Dad's battered copies of works by Black activists, Stokely Carmichael's *Black Power* and Malcolm X's *Autobiography*. Through their words, I found the courage and conviction to be able to address the profound lack of information and access to Dalit history in the diaspora. I was part of a powerful tradition of resistance.

Despite having two parents who are doctors, I returned to my caste's profession of singing and telling stories and found dignity in this. When I assumed my performance name, Dalit Diva, it was a declaration of the joy of being part of such an incredible line of creators, survivors and leaders. And there have been repercussions. I have been served by Indian friends in 'different utensils', curses

and even death threats have been hurled at me. But I have never regretted coming out. I sing the Dalit history of resilience, resistance, revolution.

(Thenmozhi is a filmmaker, singer and transmedia artist. Her first solo album, Broken People, is out in October 2012.)