

Dalit Women Technologists' Statement about Caste in Silicon Valley

We write this statement, proudly, not only as a collective of 30 Dalit feminist software engineers, but also as pathbreakers who have made a difference in education and achievement for our communities. Through a great deal of sacrifice, we have come to the United States and work across numerous companies in and beyond Silicon Valley, including Google, IBM, Cisco, Apple, Microsoft, Infosys, and Wipro, as well as small and mid-tier start-ups. Collectively, we have decades of experience in tech and we know this field like the back of our hands.

This letter is an anonymous effort, because many of us are still employed by our workplaces and not all of us are citizens. To speak out in this tenuous environment would not just mean losing our jobs, but also our immigration status. Despite these barriers, we will not be silent.

We thank John Doe from Cisco for speaking out, because his experience echoes our own. As Dalit women, we have already seen both casteism and sexism during our tech education in India. Many of us have the burden of proving ourselves to our male peers, while also facing multiple casteist assumptions that we are not competent developers. We are always having to dodge difficult caste locator questions about where we are from, what religion we practice, and whom we have married—questions designed to place us into the caste hierarchy against our will. We also have had to weather demeaning insults to our background and accusations that we have achieved our jobs solely due to affirmative action. It is exhausting.

We struggled silently through this because we did not have any other option. We are the first generation of learners from our communities. If we did not break through, the sacrifices for our families would have amounted to nothing. School was no different, as dominant caste networks often bullied Dalit students and workers. Many of us also faced some hazing and

that treatment makes you doubt yourself. We had to struggle to be able to push through.

Being women in STEM is even harder when you have the added component of caste. We are also discouraged by the level of misogyny present in these schools, due to the incessant passing of inappropriate comments and the overly forward way in which dominant caste men would approach us. They have grown up abusing us and they expected to continue this shameful behavior in schools. We survived this only to be hurled into the casteist networks of Silicon Valley Tech.

We have seen casteist bias dominate the hiring, referrals, and peer review processes in our respective workplaces. None of us were hired through those dominant caste “boys clubs” networks (we were employed through a general hiring process). As a result, working with Indian managers is a living hell. Their gender and caste politics leave a lot to be desired. Dominant caste men make jokes about Dalit reservation, as well as inappropriate jokes about Dalit and Muslim women. Hindu nationalist chauvinism has also been on the rise, following the election of India’s current Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

It is dominant caste locker room culture at its worst, and these men refuse to see or regard anybody else as their peers. They often leave women engineers out of social meetings and underestimate our capabilities, promoting their caste network friends before Dalit engineers. We cannot say with certainty that they knew we were Dalit women at every instance. However, we do know that for those of us whose last names, and caste and religious identities were apparent, we faced some sort of casteist comment (used as an excuse to classify our programming as shoddy). The worst cases resulted in sexual harassment.

The manner in which dominant caste men misbehave with our women is common. But, again, we did not have a lot of options to report these

incidents to our respective HR departments because caste was not a protected category. The worry about losing our immigration status if we were fired was another barrier. Sadly, many of us left jobs, but not tech, because of these dynamics.

We know that we thrive when we work under a non-Indian boss. Our work is seen and evaluated on merit, and we are integrated rather than being excluded. Nonetheless, Silicon Valley is far from perfect, as diversity issues across race and gender loom large. Based on our own experience, we at least have a fighting chance to advance in our companies, as long as we are freed from these casteist bosses and networks.

We need things to change. 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.

That is why we are asking all American corporations to adopt caste as a protected category and HR departments to practice cultural competencies related to caste. A good place to begin is the Ambedkar principles for corporate responsibility. We are optimistic for what the future has in store for us. We are here to be heard, and have our voices join the demand to end caste discrimination now.