



Ambedkar King Study Circle

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Mr. Raja, a well-known Tamil speaker and television personality, allegedly scrutinized the caste of a fellow Tamil person in the USA. This episode took place in Atlanta, Georgia, of the United States of America, on the sidelines of the event organised by the Greater Atlanta Tamil Sangam (GATS).

Mr. Raja has released a video claiming that he was only asking about her region, not her caste: “I asked Chettinada? Not chettiyara”. We feel that this is disingenuous because there is no reason to ask “Chettinada” when the victim had just said that she is from a major city that belongs to the very area he claims he was referring to. Many of us also know that this ‘regional name’ is also associated with the particular caste name. AKSC strongly condemns Mr. Raja for his alleged behavior and inadequate explanation.

GATS has issued a statement describing the episode as a “misunderstanding,” instead of providing the necessary remedy for the victim or taking corrective measures to prevent such incidents in the future. AKSC condemns GATS for this response, which risks making the GATS an unsafe space for those affected by caste discrimination.

We stand in full solidarity with the individual who endured these events and commend their courage in not yielding to pressure from regressive forces.

This issue has sparked unprecedented discussion among Indian communities in general and Tamils in particular. Hence, we, an anti-caste organization based in the US, working on these issues since 2016, want to address four points in this statement. Firstly, why this incident cannot be taken lightly. Secondly, why this incident should not be seen in isolation. Thirdly, how we must equip victims and bystanders to respond effectively to casteist situations. Finally, how to build a strong anti-caste consciousness among the Indians in the USA.

Many people may feel that asking and answering such questions is normal and there’s no reason to be upset. However, we need to remember that this is normal only for those who are comfortable (consciously or subconsciously) with the advantages that their dominant caste status provides. Caste is an irrational, rigid system of structural inequality. It impacts not only socio-economic well-being but also emotional well-being. *Caste and gender also intersect to add to the impact.* Caste is a source of social capital and shallow pride for some, and simultaneously a source of social exclusion and stigma for others. *Only when everyone is equipped and ready to consciously reject both, can caste be truly annihilated.*

AKSC views this episode as part of a broader pattern of casteist behavior that exists among some Indians in the United States, who are emboldened by Hindu supremacist ideologies and loosely or formally organized casteist networks. The United States has witnessed open calls for annual meetups and gatherings organized along caste lines; caste affinity groups with public websites; business entities operating overtly and covertly under caste names; cricket teams named after castes; and more. In the summer of 2020, following the Cisco

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caste discrimination case, AKSC collected over 100 testimonials documenting how caste operates in the United States.

This episode, and the responses it has sparked, reflect this deep-rooted social reality.

Unfortunately, most of us are not trained to respond when such incidents occur. Confronting these moments, both for victims and bystanders, requires **awareness, training, and a strong support system**. Historically, we have lacked the necessary support structures to navigate these situations, and that isolation has allowed these cycles to continue. Through collective learning and open discussions, we need to educate ourselves and build solidarity to navigate these situations with greater awareness and confidence. AKSC also maintains a dedicated anti-caste helpline where individuals can report caste-based incidents and seek support.

Since caste is a social problem that affects individuals, it requires a collective response that builds strong anti-caste consciousness through organizational efforts. Many individuals, progressive spaces, and cultural organisations in the US have remained silent on the issue of caste, or have maintained a “caste-neutral” stance. Their silence has only enabled and continues to enable the casteists, who are also emboldened by openly casteist networks. Therefore, all of us who are against caste, need to collectively work with and participate in activities organised by anti-caste organizations to effectively confront caste.

AKSC is an anti-caste organisation whose membership cuts across caste lines. We hold many regular programs and activities. Our reading and discussion take place once every three weeks in a hybrid format. We also celebrate the birth anniversaries of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Dr. Ambedkar, and Thanthai Periyar, and hold our annual conference in the Bay Area, California, at the end of September or early October. These programs build connections with like-minded individuals and strengthen the anti-caste community through open discussions and activities.

Finally, Tamils have a rich philosophical and ideological legacy grounded in the principle that all are equal by birth (“பிறப்பொக்கும் எல்லா உயிர்க்கும்”). We must reclaim this legacy by standing firmly against the pernicious effects of caste and working collectively to uproot it.

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