

## The South Asian Perspective(s): Desi & disabled\*

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Caste Part 2 Transcript • 56:37 mins

### **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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### **SPEAKERS**

Father Ben, Grishma, Trailer of Ahaan, Nikhil, Helen, Rekha

(Suspenseful music fades in)

**Father Ben** 00:08

As a child, no one knows what caste is all about. But there are some systems in India, the villages, existing conditions like they don't call *discrimination*, but it is a part of the daily rituals, like when I go to school will be asked to sit back. Or when you go to a local restaurant, we could see two types of classes, one for the upper caste, one for the outcast. And when we go walk into the streets of these upper caste people, we were to take our shoes off, or even we cannot ride cycle. So this is some kind of childhood experience.

(Suspenseful music fades out)

Thankfully, I had an opportunity to get education with the help of the Catholic missionaries. So that gave me an empowerment push to move forward despite the conditions of caste system. Even though, I didn't feel very bad.

**Grishma** 01:20

In part one, we got a crash course in caste, how it was considered more fluid back in the day, and it's considered more rigid today. But Father Ben isn't Hindu, he's Catholic. So these caste things shouldn't matter, right?

**Father Ben** 01:40

So I went to high school, I went to college. Being a Christian was another stumbling block. The Constitution of India provides reservation for all *Dalits*. Because we are Christians, I was not given that kind of privilege, another discrimination, which I went through as a student, not only myself, many Christians who happen to be *Dalits*. But somehow I finished my college studies. I worked in India, ordained as a Catholic priest, and worked among the *Dalits* for five years, among the poorest of the poor, I could see and witness what I myself went through as a kid, as an adult. I saw the people suffering. I saw people are being under oppression, the caste system. They were persecuted by the upper caste people, by the landlords. And they cannot ask for the rights, they cannot ask for justice. But as a priest of the village, I always motivated the people. The only way you can overcome these challenges in life is to go for education. educator, supported and promoted, advocated education among the children...came an opportunity to come to the North America, I made use of that, in Canada, then to U.S., New York. I finished my Masters in North America, then I studied my clinical education, and I was certified to be a chaplain in a hospital. So today, working for the U.S. government as a federal employee in the VA. This could never happen in India. Even if I were to live in India for another 300 years, as a *Dalit* as a Christian, that could never happen in India. But thanks for the civil liberty of this country where U.S. respects people for their talents. They don't discriminate here, based on your race, at least I have not experienced. Today I'm working for the, our veterans who gave their life and for their families. I'm very proud to give something to this country. All started from that childhood, the *Dalit* experience.

**Grishma** 04:31

You just heard from father Ben, who was born in India and is in his 60s. He's actually the oldest storyteller from the study. He came to the United States to finish his training as a chaplain and currently works at a veteran hospital. He also has a nonprofit called *Dalit Solidarity*. When I asked Father Ben if you prefer to have his name and voice changed, he opted out. He said that he was proud of where he came from.

Father Ben was right. As a child, no one knows what caste is about. Even I didn't know. When I was about eight years old, I learned what caste felt like. I was at someone's house, and there was an elderly grandfather looking man sitting on a recliner with a cane, coughing out a lung. So I said to the elderly man, "Would you like some water

grandfather?" Even though technically he wasn't related to me, that's how it's done in Desi culture. He's said he would not drink from anything that a "Varniya" would give him that made no sense to me. But man, did that pack a punch! The next day, asked my mom, "Hey, what's a Varniya?" "Where did I hear this?" "Who said it?" After I answered all her questions, she looked away and said, "That's who we are, that is our caste". The air no longer felt pure all of a sudden. But I couldn't understand why. Looking back now, I understand it wasn't the air that felt impure, the air was always pure. But I brought home the stench of unworthiness that the elderly Brahmin grandfather pushed on to me. After all, he was a Brahmin man, that's as close as you can get to white male privilege. Imagine my surprise when Father Ben said to me that because I belong to an upper caste, people will listen to me when I talk to them. That Brahmin elderly grandfather didn't. In his defense, when I was eight, he was like 80. He may have even benefited quite a bit from his caste. Or maybe he was a freedom fighter. Though I wouldn't bet on it. One thing's for sure, though, he would have felt a lot better if he had drink the water I offered him.

#### **Father Ben 07:09**

I am not totally exempted from this discrimination, even in the US, from our own fellow Indians. They just ignore. They just don't pay attention. That is the way they treat *Dalits* in this country. That I have to nothing to do with you guys. If they want to say simply they'll say *Hi*. Once they come to know where I am from, what I'm doing, especially for the *Dalits*, They'll say, *Okay, good, good*. That's it. There'll be no further interaction. But I'm not worried about this. But I have a larger project, larger picture of my people in India, 300 million people who are still under the pressures of this oppression. 300 million means India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, they were all India once you know. Today, we are in different countries. But wherever Indians move, the problem continues with them. So being, my presence here, I use every opportunity, I use every challenge, I use every gift God has given to me to empower our own people back home. I try to be an advocate, I try to lobby for the rights of our people, knocking at the doors of the UN, knocking at the doors of the US Congress, even to the European Union. It's very tough task. It's not easy. But through lobbying one step at a time, it may take longer time, but at least I am trying to make the story of our *Dalits*, the plight of *Dalits* to the world communities. I can honestly tell you when I came to this country in 1996, most people have no idea about the *Dalits* in the US. Today, lots of Americans, Canadians know about the plight of *Dalits* I can take credit for 5% at least, because I started this 1996, then in 2000 I made it an official *Dalit Solidarity* as a nonprofit organization, through which legally and lawfully, we are advocating for the rights of the marginalized and the *Dalits*. This is one my belief system that every person who came to this world as a purpose has a calling. That calling for me is to be a beacon of hope, for our fellow *Dalits*, because they are the voiceless people. Not too many speak for them. Although it

can be very tough in India. But I live in a country which is much better, you have the freedom of speech where the country respects your opinion. Dr. Ambedkar said, you know, in 1916, caste problem remained a local problem in India, but he prophesied even hundred years ago that wherever Indians move, that will become a global problem (Diwakar, 2020). That's what happened. Now, lots of Indians are everywhere, all over the country, Canada, Europe, and the U.S. so wherever Indians go, they carry the baggage of caste prejudice with them. They take all the good things of a particular country, whether you're in Australia, or the U.S. or UK, they use make use of the existing advantages of the country. But they don't want to give up the bad elements they brought with them. So they conveniently mix the good things in this country, rights, all the civil liberties. At the same time, they also try to violate the rights of other people, fellow Indians, because they happen to be *Dalits*.

In this country, they cannot do it openly. But, once they come to know the social gatherings, or some Indian festivals or in your workplace, they're very easy to find out where the guy is coming from, that is not a top secret. It is not a mystery. Once they come to know that you are outcast or a *Dalit*, they will not exploit you like the way they do in India, but they will try to show their resentment by ignoring people, they will not have anything to do with us. If you happen to work under them, like a tech industry, like Cisco, like Microsoft, they will try to control all the promotion, make sure that you don't go upward. The caste system you have to remain where you are, you cannot move forward. So, there is no upward mobility. So these Indian guys who are working this country, especially the ITech fellows, who most of the managers are Brahmins with the exception to few, not only Brahmins even the other caste people too, once they hold that high position they try to control. They may not do to fellow Americans because they will be in trouble. But they will try to poison slowly the fellow Indians whom they think, they are not fit to be in that prestigious position. Can we prove scientifically or can you prove with evidences? Yes, it is happening, here and there. In fact Cisco is going through lawsuit in California (Diwakar, 2020).

**Grishma** 12:57

The way that I understand this case is that, a dude, let's call him, John, who had a background of IT, got a great job and needed to relocate. He moves from India to California. Turns out that his boss, who's an upper caste Brahmin knew this guy, because they both went to the same school. He was facing discrimination from his boss because he was from the *Dalit* community. He goes to HR, HR says that this is not a form of discrimination. Boss gets another job, is replaced by another upper class Brahmin guy. This new boss also knows that John is from the *Dalit* community. So the discrimination continues. Promotions are halted. He's taken off of projects. So John

goes to the state of California and says hey, this is what's happening. And thus begins the case about caste discrimination due to your ancestry.

**Father Ben** 14:09

The fact in New Jersey, the recent lawsuit against New Jersey Hindu Temple (Mukherji, 2021). 200 *Dalits* were brought to New Jersey under the fraudulent method by religious workers visa. Religious workers visa have lot to fulfill to the US Embassy in India. We don't know how they diked the US Embassy in India, because I myself came with a religious visa. I know how tough it is to prove to the US Embassy. Under this they brought 200 *Dalits* to work as bonded laborers to work as a slaves in New Jersey. The irony is, people who are banned to enter into the Hindu temple in India, they are brought in a very cheating way, fraudulent method to build a Hindu temple in this country. A Hindu temple is a place of sacredness, where you believe God dwells. We are all image and likeness of God. But the caste system doesn't accept that. Perhaps that may be the reason why they brought them and they exploited them, here. These are some of the examples I can share from my own personal experiences. I myself was interviewed by the federal court reporter from New Jersey with regard to this. Most of these Indians support the Indian guys back home, the current administration, in upholding the caste system. Of course, if you believe on karma, if you believe on caste system, nothing wrong in that. It is your own personal convictions, I have nothing to do with that. But using that system, you don't inflict injury on me, on fellow human beings.

**Grishma** 16:09

Imagine going to Target or Walmart, and someone acknowledges your existence with a smile or nod. It's a pretty good feeling I think. But instead of a smile, imagine they have a question mark on their face giving you a "What are you doing here?" look, and not a welcoming one at that.

**Helen** 16:31

So I have noticed this one thing, when you're walking on the road or when you come across another Desi, somehow I just feel like the expression is a question mark. It's not very welcoming. Like you know, when you walk on the road, you just like, genuinely maybe smile or just, just say hi or it's you acknowledge the other person. But when you see another Desi, it's more of a question mark, like, *What are you doing here?* kind of a thing (chuckles). Like, it's just the way I felt. It's not very welcoming. It's not like, Hey, you belong to the same community. So you know, you just smile or something. It's not

that. And I don't know why that is such maybe because back in India, you just don't go smiling at everybody. You're too busy to do that. So maybe that's why? But, it's just a very old exchange of body language that we have, like really just passed by another Desi.

**Grishma 17:35**

Remember, Helen moved to the United States just a couple of years ago. I'd argue this, what are you doing here, question mark, might be connected to what Professor Chakravorty was saying about how certain things are more visible, like a physical disability or dark skin. And Helen happens to have dark skin. The episode on skin tone, it definitely shined a light on the perception of fair skin or light skin equating to more beautiful or dare I say it more worthy. So that look of *What are you doing here?* could it be connected to, *Are you worthy of being here?* Is there a perception of if you are able to live in the United States, you should be worthy enough to be here? And if someone doesn't fit the definition of worthy or beauty, like they don't have light skin; does it make sense that they're here and not back in their native place, which in Helen's case is India? So what is Helen doing here? Helen's here living her stupid life, like all of us are living our stupid lives. I want to introduce you to a term I recently learned invisible *Dalit*. The way I understand this, if you are from the *Dalit* community, but you look like a quote unquote, upper caste person, then you are an invisible *Dalit*. Meaning that you're beautiful, aka you have fair skin (Mukherji, 2021). Or that you're really well educated. Or that you're really well-mannered. The perception is that folks from the *Dalit* community don't have these qualities.

**Father Ben 19:29**

When parents help them, the children to education or to the higher level. If they live in a city or even in a village, they always try to hide their identity as a *Dalit*. They also tell their children when you go to college or when you go to city, don't even show that you are so and so, because that will curtail your growth. People come to know that you are a so and so, there'll be always backlash that happens. In America, there are a lot of *Dalits*, who don't want to accept where they came from. Not because they want to hide it, because they don't want any backlash. They don't want any further demotion opposite to promotion, if they happen to work for Indian companies or firms. However, the upper caste people find them out through some means or other, you know. That is the, the negative part of the caste system. The Bible says in Genesis, Who told you that you are naked, Adam said, God is asking for you that, like that, Who told you that you are useless? Who told you that you are worthless? Who told you that you are a *Dalit*? So because of that only many of them are invisible. They want to take care of your own lives. Because that affects every aspect of their life. Especially in the United States. If they want to get their children to get married, most of them they want to marry their own

fellow Indians. But when it comes that stage, people immediately ask, in India, which caste you belong to? You know, once they've come out, there'll be devastating consequences. Three years ago, a girl from Washington D.C., she's from Tamil Nadu, I come from, everything has been fixed. The invitation has been printed. Now tiles and everything has been all fixed. The gods got all the Sarees from India, just like the way they do, the Indian. All of sudden, in just before two to three days, I think, marriage was canceled. And one of the families told me confidentially, *that boy who was dating this girl for years and years, seems to be a Brahmin. This girl seems to be a Dalit*. Both of them, born and brought up in this country, so they are probably, that is not a big stumbling block for them to love each other, to date. But the family came to know that this girl is a *Dalit*, they gave pressure to the boys think, they stopped their marriage. Can you believe this? This ever happen in this country? This girl could have gone to the court to this country, it would have become a big news. The whole family of the boy would have been so embarrassed, but it didn't happen. So that's the reason why many people don't want to identify themselves, who they are. See, I myself very bold, I told you I am a *Dalit*. What is to be ashamed of? Why should I say *Dalit* lives doesn't matter? Why should I be ashamed of my identity? This the power of the caste system created by the people. The caste system made them Oh, you are a worthless, you are bad you are less than human. And this caste people imposed under the banner of religion. So that the next life you do better karma during this time as a slave or as a *Dalit*, in your next life your good karma will earn you to be in the caste (system).

I have studied theology, I have been religion for so many years, if I say something, you know with authority, I can tell you, that is simply an excuse to escape blame on them. They want to take advantage of their inability. They're powerlessness. They can do anything with the women in India, especially the *Dalit* women, they can rape, they can do whatever they want. They can always escape justice and these *Dalits* in India, they will never get justice. So if this upper caste people believe that it is the right, for me this is simply an excuse. If a white man rapes Indian woman because she's black, will you justify it? It happened actually during the time of apartheid. In South Africa, you know during the type of time of apartheid we all know what happened in South Africa. Or even in our own country (U.S.) under the racism we know that. But can we accept that? Now, today people are repentant for that. Today, the hard work of Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther, all these people said, you know, this is simply your own agenda. This is your own religion, not God's religion. Because the Bible in one place says, slaves, be obedient to your master, are writing to fellow Christians. Apartheid was justified with that for years. But you know, they came to a conclusion, realization, enough is enough. We have to look into deep into our own, you know, what is the essence of religion, any religion, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism? Love. Love is the essence of any religion, will you accept this kind of atrocity, violence, towards fellow human beings? Only through education, and through empowerment, social development, I feel if I could speak like

that. It didn't happen overnight, it took so many years. But even when I go back to my own village, I am still a *Dalit*...so that is a system.

**Grishma 26:39**

So if I was to rate myself similar to the way that Jeetendra rated himself, a one to a ten. I'm pretty educated. So I'd probably be closer to a nine or a ten. But then, I also have a physical disability. So then I go back to that one. No longer a zombie, so no longer a zombie, so I go closer back to the one. And I'm not tall, so I go closer back to the one, and I'm not a Brahman or a Kshatriya, but I am a merchant, so then I go closer back to the five. What happens if I wasn't from the merchant caste? Because the merchant caste is still considered part of the upper caste? What happens if I was part of the *Dalit* community? These are the things that I really wanted to explore when I was talking to Father Ben. Can you tell me about experiences of how being a *Dalit* and being disabled affects your identity in Desi culture?

**Father Ben 27:41**

Being a *Dalit*, you know, myself, I'm already discriminated under the caste system in India, various ways, can't walk into the street openly, I cannot enter into the temple publicly. You know, even when I go to the public restaurants, that is also not good treatment, different treatment. So I went through all those things. Still, it goes on, not the same way that it was like in my childhood time. So that is the first level of discrimination, second as a Christian. In India, because we are Christians, we are considered a forward caste, they are considered, because again, it is an excuse on the part of the government, because the government is afraid if equalities imposed, implement and if the reservation is given to the Christians, everybody will become Christians. That, they are false dream, you know, but that's not the case, *Dalits* are *Dalits* whether you are Christians, or Buddhists, or Islam. If you could bring the Sikhs, if you bring the Buddhists to the reservation, originally they are not part of the reservation, only the Hindus were, but eventually because of the politics, they were brought into the system. So only the Christians and the Islam Muslims are still are not able to enter into the reservation. So as a Christian, we are discriminated again. If I were a Hindu *Dalit* in India, by the time probably I would have been a doctor or something, I could have gone to the government position, like IAS officer, or ambassadors, all those things. So we don't enjoy as a Christian. And there's no difference between Hindu *Dalit* Christian *Dalit*, That is why I have the example even as a Catholic, how much we suffer even today we are suffering. That is the second level of discrimination. I'm talking about. The third level of discrimination if you are a *Dalit* as a woman, you know, at least being a man *Dalit* there is some prestige, some dignity, but if you're a woman, let's say a



Christian, *Dalit* woman, triple discrimination, by the government by the society as well as by our own fellow society where she is considered as a woman.

If you happen to be disabled probably that will be the fourth discrimination. If you are a woman disabled that is much pathetic. That is all the more, very deplorable. So, the level of discrimination is changing according to the person. So, women face a triple, we face twice, but whatever it is whether it is a triple or twice, or a single, discrimination is discrimination. Because it, it robs of our humanity. It robs of our dignity which we deserve as a human being. If a dog is treated so nicely in India, if a cat is enjoying, go to any part of the rooms, the human being cannot even enter the door of an upper caste. Many *Dalit* children even they were severely punished just for a simple silly things like drinking water in the taps, like a plucking some fruits from the tree of the upper caste garden, kids don't know anything about that. But just by going with the shoes, the small little ones they are severely punished by the upper caste people even their hands were cut some time in some cases, honestly. So such a severe punishment given to kids just for small, silly thing. You can imagine how the *Dalits* whether it is a single or a triple *Dalit* is a *Dalit*.

**Grishma 27:51**

Did you say that their hands get cut off?

**Father Ben 31:15**

...Happened honestly, it has happened. Like fingers like this, so that they don't do the same mistake again. Sometimes what happened they bring the, put the knife in the furnace, and bring it and put it like that so that that mark will remain there that you should not cross the border you're to remain where you are. Now sometimes they cut their fingers, dick also. Recently one *Dalit* boy went to the temple, just you know, like one of them innocently went to the temple like a step. His feet was cut. These things happened in North India. Just to follow one simple fact, he just happened to climb into the temple just to worship God. Religion, there nothing fault of the religion actually. You know, when you said *I ignore, I just cut away my religion*. There's nothing fault, wrong with any religion. All religions promote unity, brotherhood, sisterhood, fraternity. It is how our guys are interpreting. It is how these guys are treating fellow. It's not the fault of the religion. You can still remain as a good Christian you can still remain as a good Hindu. Even if you don't belong to any religions still you can remain as a good person. That is the greatest of all. Only religion comes second, first being a person, then the rest. The religion, the caste, whatever you call it.

**Grishma 33:53**

Ouch. I was knocked out for my imputation and it still hurts so freakin bad. And I was 18 years old. These are kiddos that are losing fingers, feet or a dick for being kiddos. For going up the steps of a temple or going into people's gardens and picking fruits. Simply because one identity has been created to have more worth and beauty than another identity, we can treat people like this. It reminds me of another community that's been oppressed because we have been told that their worth and their beauty is less than the African American/Black community. Substitute African American every time Father Ben says *Dalit*.

### **Father Ben 34:48**

In my opinion, traditionally people have been taught under the caste system you are not worth...Born outside the caste system, you are meant to be at the servitude. You are not supposed to learn scripture. You are not supposed to go to school. You are at the service of other people, because you did a bad karma. So, traditionally, that is the mindset of the caste system, you are useless, you are insignificant. So that has been done for centuries, centuries, centuries. When a person has been hearing this all the time, all the time, all the time, what type of growth that person will ever attain? As a mom, if you tell only one of your children... *your brother is doing very well, your sister is doing very well, what you are? You are good for nothing*. If all the time a parent said that to particular child, what level of growth you will achieve? So *Dalits* have been always blamed, brought into low self-esteem. *You are good for nothing. You are supposed to be at the service of other people. You cannot move forward. You're always supposed to be at this level*. But Ambedkar changed that concept, saying you can change your destiny. It's all about you, how do you think of yourself, self-concept and self-esteem. It is not what others speak about you, it is what you think about you. So because of education, because of our own self-improvement, we developed the beauty of life.

For me personally, every person is worth before God or even before the humanity. All are equal. No matter whether you're *Brahmin*, whether you are outcast. Garbage will be everywhere, marble will be everywhere. You know, you cannot see only (that) the marble will be only among the Brahmins. How many times have you seen garbage even among them? How many times have you seen the marble? How do you explain that Ambedkar, a *Dalit* come in a time, in 1918 or 16? How did he come to UK? How did he come to the U.S.? How did he get three law degrees, you know, PhDs? A *Dalit*? Beauty is everywhere, only your eyes are blocked. It all depends how you see a person. If I see the beauty in you, you will be beautiful, beautiful not external beauty I'm talking about. That internal beauty. But if you don't want to see that internal beauty, even if you are beautiful externally, it will not mean anything to me. So your own background means a lot to yourself. The way you grow up.

Now I bring my religion here. You know, even though I don't always talk about that, my own faith in Christianity, and gave me that broader look out perspective saying whether you are a girl, or boy LGBT or gay or whatever, I see the face of God, beauty of person. Whether you are black or white, every person I feel you know, respect, image and likeness of God. If you see that, then you are a visible presence of God to them. Like Mother Teresa or like Gandhi say, if we are able to see God in the face of the poor, there you have achieved the purpose of your karma. So that is where you see the beauty of life. I came across so many people in my life. Some of the atheists will never believe in God, most wonderful people reaching out to those who are (at) the margins. The same time I've seen most worst people among the clergy, among those whom you call as a high class people. They won't even open their wallet or a penny to the poorest of the poor. People who go to church everyday, people who go to temple, I have seen the worst attitude towards their fellow human being.

(Suspenseful, fast paced violin music fades in)

### **Grishma 39:46**

The caste system may be deeper than we think, deeper than even Hinduism. Father Ben's experiences may be shining a light on how well the British watered the seeds of caste hierarchy.

### **Father Ben 40:17**

(Suspenseful, fast paced violin music fades out)

They say the caste is thicker than the waters of Baptism. You know once we are baptized, we are supposed to overcome all these things. But unfortunately, even within the Christianity which I belong to, a caste system is so strong, because I am a *Dalit*. I am qualified in many ways, even to become a Bishop. With all the knowledge I'm not longing. I can become maybe a junior senator, in the U.S., senator I can become. I cannot become a president because I was not born in this country. But, in my own church, Christianity Catholic Church, they won't appoint me as a bishop, because I am an outcast. So if it happens in a Catholic Church, which supposed to be more example, more appealing, like Mother Teresa, St. Francis of Assisi, how do you expect even among the other people, like most Hindus are innocent. They go by whatever the religion's talking about. If our Indian Christians, upper caste Bishops, who are well educated, who studied scriptures, theology to the depth, they could not even accept me, even to be a Bishop. I'm not longing for a Bishop. What I am saying is, how it is a stumbling block, not only in Hinduism, even in Christianity.

**Grishma** 41:55

I thought that once you are Baptized, and you change your religion, then your caste no longer matters. People do that they change their religion, they convert to Islam, or they convert to Christianity, because of *Dalit* caste (Mukherji, 2021).

**Father Ben** 42:17

It remains only the hope level. You know, it remains in the hope level. Whether it's Islam, whether it's the Buddhism. There has been some progress, I don't deny that...but overall I'm talking about. Overall, I'm talking about.

**Grishma** 42:33

The *Thems* versus the *Us*'s.

**Rekha** 42:38

So growing up, you and I learned about the civil rights movement, about slavery, about the struggles of Black people in America, right? Our parents grew up in India, they have no education on that, there, most of them haven't even met a black person until they moved here, to be honest. Because every perspective that Indians get of Black people, once they move here is through the media, or it's through what they hear from other people. Just recently, my sister and I set my parents down and they didn't even know like, the extent of how terrible slavery was. I had to sit them down and talk to them about it. And I think that's why a lot of Desis don't even acknowledge the struggle of Black people. It's because they don't even know what their struggle was. And so they're only aware and they only know the story of Indian colonization, right. So then we're like, "*Oh, my God, they took over our whole country*". And then when you tell them, "*Oh, Africa was colonized as well*", then it's like, "*Oh, but so were we*". But we were never enslaved, taken somewhere else, whipped, raped, beaten, and then left in a society that was never built to support us. We were given the opportunity to come here and succeed and that came at the price of Black Americans fighting for us. But this is not something that most adults in our society ever even learn. So I think that's why it's even more important for younger Desis to have these discussions with their parents. Because if you never talked to your parents about slavery, if you never tried to use your privilege of being born here, and having the time and the education to learn about these things, if you never use that to better past generations and let them know about what happened, then obviously the stigmas are just going to keep going.

**Grishma** 44:27

Yeah, at the end of the day, you're right. It's all about the stories that you hear and what you see in the media.

**Rekha** 44:36

And the media continuously just demonizes Black people. And, when we talk about the Southside, what racial demographic do Indians usually placed there (chuckles)? And we never have a positive view of the Southside. But that's only because that's what the media shows us. They never show us how the Southside got to that point. Or how it was the white people that made it that way. But they just want to blame the society that already lives there, because that's how the media, and that's how American society shows them. And I think that's why all these minorities have such a muddled view. Because once you get here, all you get to learn is based on your privilege, based on whether you were born here or not. And based on who you interact with, and the thing with most Desis, is they only interact with the Desi community, because that's the only community that accepts them. So then you really don't get any view on what it's actually like to be Black in America, because you just don't interact with Black people, you just use the media and whatever you can perceive.

**Grishma** 45:43

I know I said this before, and I'm gonna say it again, I want to be like Rekha when I grow up.

**Rekha** 45:49

Sometimes change is happening. And we don't even notice. Like, when it comes to how people for how many decades have been fighting for racial equality. How many people actually knew that right? People thought that it ended with the civil rights movement. And then it just rebegan after Michael Brown's case happened in Ferguson, and all this stuff. But no, like the critical resistance, the Black Panther Party, these people have been fighting for how long?

**Grishma** 46:16

Rekha also mentioned something really important about Desi identity.

**Rekha** 46:22

Another thing is like, I think the thing with being Desi and having this cultural identity, is often it creates fragmentation between people of different minority groups. Even though we should be working together, because all of us face oppression in one form or another. But then people are like, *"Oh, no, I'm more oppressed than you"* or *"Fighting for your rights means that I'm not fighting for my own"*. But that's not true. And I think that like really plays into the whole thing too.

### **Grishma 46:54**

Reka hits at home with this one, because she really nicely explains the difference between narrow bounding, and broad bounding (Ganz, 2020), meaning that we all face some type of discrimination, whether it's gender, disability, religion, race, sexual status, our age, our skin color, our hair color. I can keep going, but I'm not going to. If you want to bound more narrowly, then you start to say, Okay, well, everyone that is not upper caste, and Catholic will not become a bishop. That way, you are creating more power within that narrow community. There's another way to do this. And it's called the third story. And that's also part of the difference framework (Ganz, 2020). The way I understood third story was from an example of a couple that was getting divorced, and they had a child (Winslade & Monk, 2000). They (chuckles) no longer liked each other, but they had mutual interests for the child. They wanted their child to have the best life that that child could. And in order for that to happen, they needed to be able to work together. They were able to work together by sharing a common value, the child. If we're able to share a common value, like family, like safety, like love, like fear, all of these common values can help us come together cause there are more things that make us similar, then make us different. But it's very difficult to find that common value, when what you're really seeing are all of the differences, whether it's because of media or the stories that you have heard (Dishman, 2020; Heumann).

Father Ben said, first and foremost, even before religion, you need to look at humanity. Then comes everything else; disability, your caste, your orientation, the skin color, the race. Everything else comes after that. I believe there's another great third story and that is storytelling. We can share those perspectives that are unheard, that are untold, that really show you the humanity, the common values among different identities. And a great example of that is the film Ahaan (Sengupta, 2021). Ahaan was created by my friend Nikhil Pherwani. And it's a story...actually rather than tell you what the story is about, Nikhil suggested you just listen to their trailer.

### **Trailer of Ahaan 49:32**

Boy: Yeah, so ready? *Dalo ball* (Should I throw you the ball)?

Ahaan: *Ha, dalo* (Yeah, throw it).

Boy: Ahaan ready, *dalo ball*, Ahaan hit the sixer!

(Upbeat music begins)

Boy: *Arre bapre* (Oh dang)

Ahaan: Hi Mom, How do I look? (Burps)

Mom: *Ahaan, Anu Aunty ko brownies deyaho* (Ahaan, drop off the brownies to Anu Aunty)

(Doorbell rings)

Anu Aunty: Ahaan Hi!

Ahaan: Hi

Man: Hold it there young man. *Tum apne ghar per bhi jute pankar gumte ho?* (Do you walk around with shoes on at your house?)

(Music changes, different upbeat music begins)

Doctor: Your wife has left you, Why? *Sex nahi hota?* (You can't have sex)?

(Knocking on door)

Anu Aunty: Your OCD just drives me nuts!

Man: *Anu rok jao, kya karehi ho!?* (Anu, wait, what are you doing!?)

Anu Aunty: Let me Go!

(Music changes, different upbeat music begins)

Man: *Under ayoge?* (Want to come in?)

Man: I'll pick you up, 11:30.

Ahaan: Okay

Man: Below where you stay, our secret. Doesn't matter.

Ahaan: Aunty you sweetie.

(Music changes to suspenseful)

Anu Aunty: Using poor Ahaan for your own selfish needs, I have nothing to say to you!

(Suspenseful music fades out)

(Upbeat, cheerful music begins)

Father: *Kal se, tum kider bhar nahi jaoge!* (From tomorrow onwards, (Ahaan) you will not go out anywhere out of this house!)

Man: Ahaan, I'm really sorry *yaar* (dude).

Ahaan: *Tum boot chalo huh* (You are very sly).

Ahaan: I want to make money. I want my flat, my Shaadi (marriage) I want my wife. I want two children, one boy, one girl.

Man: *Ahaan ke saat wakt guzarne baad* (After spending time with Ahaan), I've realized we complicate things a lot. It's so simple, uncomplicated, no pretenses. And he's all heart.

Man: (Ahaan), What do you want to be in 10 years?

Ahaan: Ahaan.

Man: Girls love compliments, *jaise* (like) you have a beautiful smile, beautiful eyes, beautiful hair.

Ahaan: Sexy

Man: No!

(Upbeat cheerful music fades out)

End of trailer.



**Grishma** 51:33

So do you have somebody in your family with a disability Nikhil?

**Nikhil** 51:37

No, in fact, I haven't seen disability closely at all. You know, there's nobody I know with a condition. In fact, it was stories from all across the globe like in the form of film, which has resonated somehow. Because somehow I feel that it's more to, than just disability. So, you know, when I set out to make my first first film, I felt that this is a great subject. So much potential to create something which will have social impact, you know. So I said, let's do something on this. But, yeah, back to your question. It was only through when I started getting into the material when I started seeing a lot of, you know, maybe content on disability, films, in the process when I was researching, I was visiting care centers. That's when I met a lot of parents and a lot of you know, children with developmental disabilities. And that's when I met this guy with charm, Abuli, you know, who's who's the hero of my film, and who plays the leading guy. And I've known him since a long time. I've known him since 2013, eight years now. The time I've spent with him and his family, I think that really opened up my perceptions of disability. He was this guy who was five minutes of my meeting him, telling me about his dreams and aspirations and how he wants to be in the movies. So I feel, you know, those things were fascinating. And I felt like you know, let's explore. Let's explore.

**Grishma** 53:01

(Cheerful, upbeat piano music fades in)

Stories told my mom that she needed to wish to outlive me, by one day. Stories told my ex-fiance's family, a daughter-in-law with a physical disability just won't do, even if she's zombie pale. Stories tell us who gets our love, our respect, our hate, and a knee on the neck. Like Rekha and Dev said, we need to be better role models for our future generation. Like Jeetendra said, it's through talking that we can move away from stigmas. Stigmas about disability and that God is punishing you or mad at you. And like Professor Chakravorty said, we need to question the information that we get. Is it true or is it truthiness? Truthiness is information that appears to be true, but isn't (Chakravorthy, 2019). Is it true that if you're disabled God hates you? No. Disability is not a curse. In the case of skin color, dark skin doesn't mean that you're less beautiful or less worthy. In the case of gender, being a woman doesn't mean that you are a stone or worthless. Religion, they all promote unity and love. Are your loved ones free from discrimination? If they are, lucky you! But most likely, they're not. It's time to question

why we think the way we do and what is truth and what is truthiness. So it's time to get involved, for the next generation and to help the past generation. And with that we end part two of caste.

I always wonder why folks getting the Oscars take so long to thank so many people. And I had the same problem here. But I do want to say thank you to all those that have supported me. And to those that didn't. It made it a lot easier to know who my cheerleaders are (chuckles). And my cheerleaders have come in every size, age, shape, species, skin color, disability ability, you can imagine. To call some though, I can't look down to use my phone. I'll have to look up to the sky and talk to. To Dr. Bradley Olson, my advisor, Dr. Judah Viola and Dr. Tiffeny Jimenez, my committee members, Dr. Marshall Ganz, Robert Martin, the first person to do a podcast dissertation Dr. Anna Williams, to my sister Jalpa, my mom Hemangini, and my dad Dilip, thank you for all the mentorship and guidance. Now, the final step is to defend this bad boy. So stay tuned for the very last episode of this dissertation to hear about what happened and what I'll be up to after I get the letters Dr!

(Cheerful, romantic upbeat piano music fades out)

End of Caste Part 2 transcript

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