CoHNA
Coalition of Hindus of North America

A Survey of the American Understanding of Caste

CoHNA (Coalition of Hindus of North America) *is a grassroots level advocacy and civil rights organization dedicated to improving the understanding of Hinduism in North America by working on matters related to the Hindu community and by educating the public about Hindu heritage and tradition. Through its grassroots level work, CoHNA seeks to make an impact on how Hinduism and India are discussed in the North American mainstream – among the youth, in the media and within political circles. We believe that, through mutual respect and understanding, we can make the world a better place, enriched with values and practices from various religious and traditional paths – including Hinduism. For more information, please visit* https://cohna.org, *email us at* info@cohna.org *or follow @cohnaofficial on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.*

Introduction

It has recently become an article of faith that discrimination based on caste is ubiquitous in the United States. But, apart from anecdotal evidence, the only actual source of data for this claim is a survey conducted in 2018 by Equality Labs. The deep flaws in that survey are well documented elsewhere (see here and here) and do not bear repeating here. The only other "evidence" cited is an unproven set of allegations against Cisco Systems by the California Civil Rights Department (CRD). However, that "evidence" also stands demolished after the recent dismissal of the CRD lawsuit against two Cisco engineers of Indian origin since the department itself faced sanctions for prosecutorial misconduct. This effectively pulled the rug from under an argument that has been used to pass caste policies in various universities from the Cal State System to Harvard, along with the recent caste ordinance in Seattle.

In the wake of California proposing a law (SB-403) to include caste as a new protected category, a potential trial on caste discrimination would empanel a jury of ordinary Americans. Would they be able to reach a fair verdict or would they be biased about the origins and nature of caste? Furthermore, the policy interpretation and enforcement will also be carried out by ordinary Americans. Would they be able to enforce a policy without bias or prejudiced notions about caste or without the presumption of guilt towards Hindu Americans or people of Indian origin? Proponents and supporters of the legislation have variously claimed that:

- Caste does not automatically mean India

- Caste is found across multiple religions, not just Hinduism
- Caste is identifiable by features such as name, practices such as dietary habits, physical features such as skin color, etc. (see, for example, p. 44 of Equality Labs' Caste Survey).
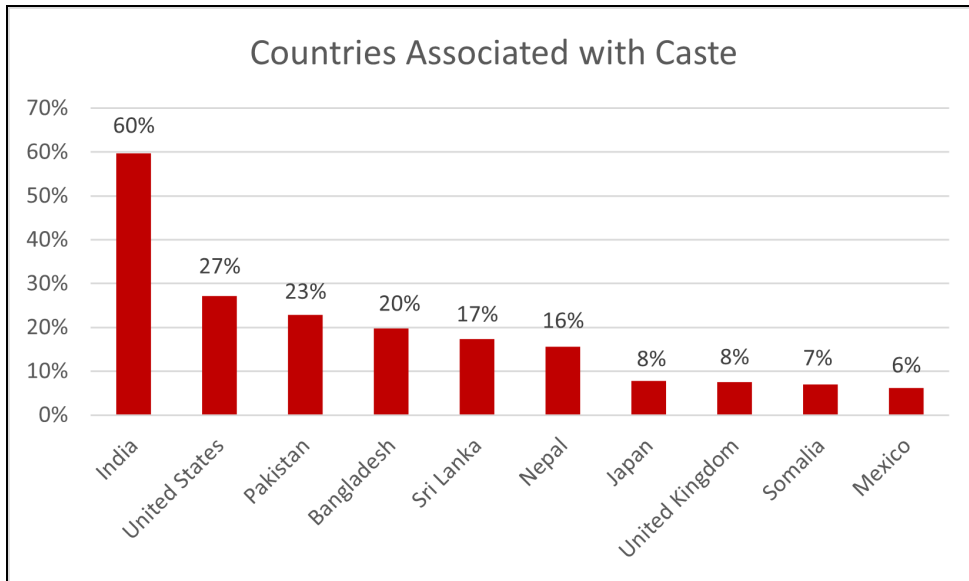
On the other hand, opponents have argued that, due to the popular narrative, caste is firmly associated with Hinduism and India in the minds of the average American; it is not possible to identify one's caste in a neutral way from characteristics such as a last name or skin color. Various dictionaries also define caste in the Hindu context.

A recent survey conducted by CoHNA (March 2023), based on a YouGov US national sample of 1,500 responses provides clarity. YouGov is an internationally recognized internet based polling company that is widely used by major organizations, media houses, political analysts and others to collect opinions on business, politics, public affairs, social trends, etc. (Note – YouGov did not conduct the poll or otherwise design the questions. They provided a statistically valid national sample of 1500 respondents who represented the US population).

Executive Summary of Findings:

- To the average American, caste is **_clearly_** associated with India and therefore Hinduism. Attempting to soften this association by claiming caste exists across geographies from Japan to South America is misdirection.

- Only 8% of respondents have actual experience with the caste system. It is not as widespread as claimed.

- It is not possible to identify caste by last name or other characteristics, even by those who report extensive knowledge of caste.

- A **_clear majority_** of people surveyed first learned about caste from their middle and high school social sciences textbooks.

- Few people know that there are [thousands of castes in India](#), along with [25,000 "sub-castes"](#), according to some sources. The 2011 socio-economic census of India put the number of castes, sub-castes, clans, etc. [at a staggering 4.6 Million](#)! Of the people that do have an opinion on the number of castes, a **_clear majority_** claims there are only four castes. This is consistent with how caste is taught in American schools.

- These results do not vary much across generational cohorts.

- US based Millennials reporting extensive "personal" experience with caste also point to social media and WhatsApp as their sources of knowledge.

1. **Is caste associated with India (Indian origin Americans) and Hindus?**

Countries Associated with Caste

| Country	Percentage
India	60%
United States	27%
Pakistan	23%
Bangladesh	20%
Sri Lanka	17%
Nepal	16%
Japan	8%
United Kingdom	8%
Somalia	7%
Mexico	6%

It is not even close. India (and therefore, Hinduism) are associated with the caste system more than any other country by a factor of two. Thus, the claim that the caste system is somehow widespread and not associated with Hindus or people of Indian origin is simply untenable.

2. Is caste ("Dalit") identifiable by external characteristics such as last name?

Equality Labs' Caste Report (p.44) claims that "(Last Name) is often the strongest indicator of one's Caste Location." However, when put to the test, the results are quite telling.

The survey listed several common Indian names in a mix of supposedly "Dalit" or "Upper Caste" names. Our hypothesis going in was that the average American would not successfully identifies y "Dalit" last names from "Upper Caste" last names. We were not surprised that nine out of ten respondents simply said they had no idea how to do that.
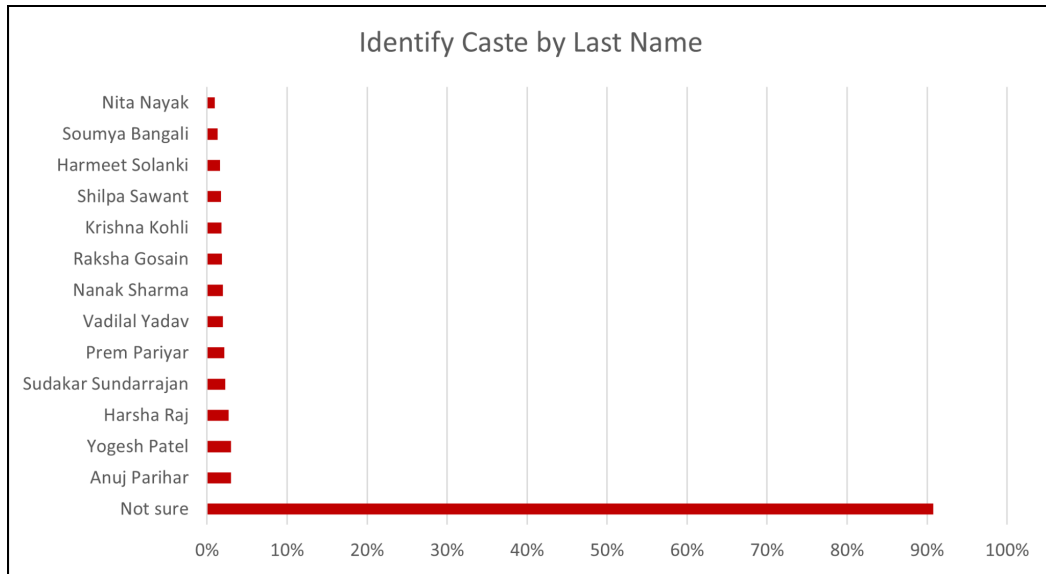

It is clear that at least in the minds of a statistically valid cross section of Americans, caste is associated with India and Hinduism but trying to identify caste location based on last name is no better than a random guess.

Building upon this, the survey also looked at other characteristics.

3. Are caste distinctions identifiable by other attributes such as food preferences, educational level, skin tone, hair texture, etc.?

Similar to the above argument, the Equality Labs' survey (p.44) also claims that, besides names, various characteristics can be used to identify one's caste, including food preferences, skin tone, name of the ancestral village or geographical location, religion, family and social affiliations, etc. We therefore tested against such attributes. It is clear that over 60% of Americans cannot identify caste distinctions based on any of these characteristics.
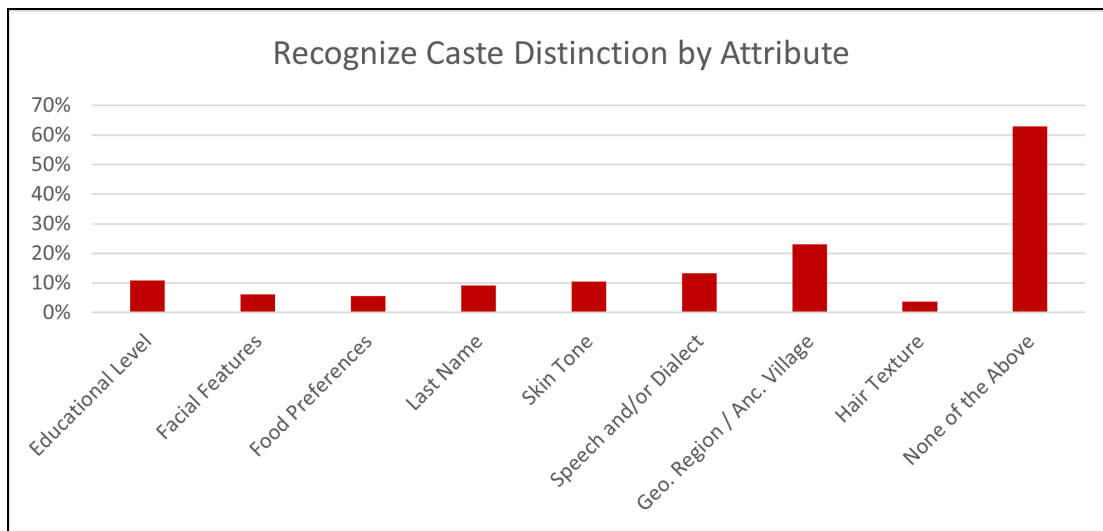
Next, the survey also explored the general awareness of caste in the minds of Americans.

4. What is the general knowledge of the caste system?

Knowledge of Caste

Awareness by Age Cohort
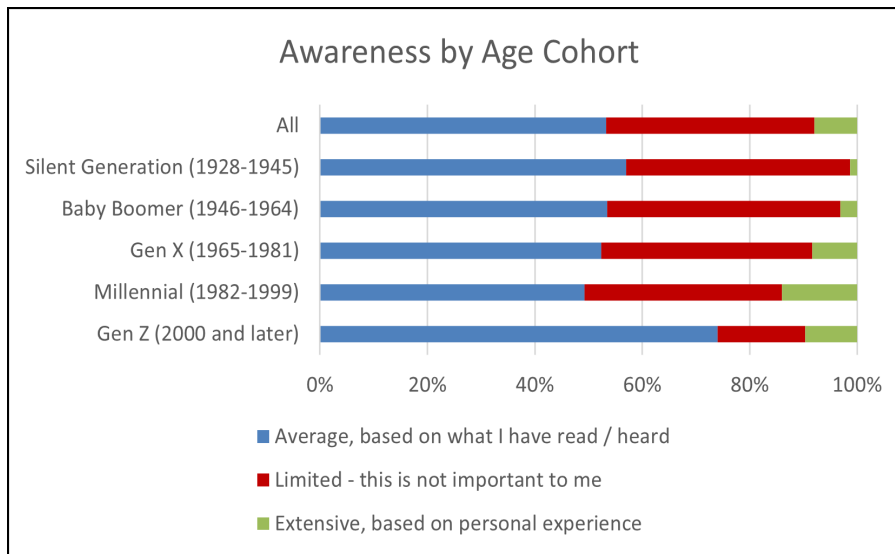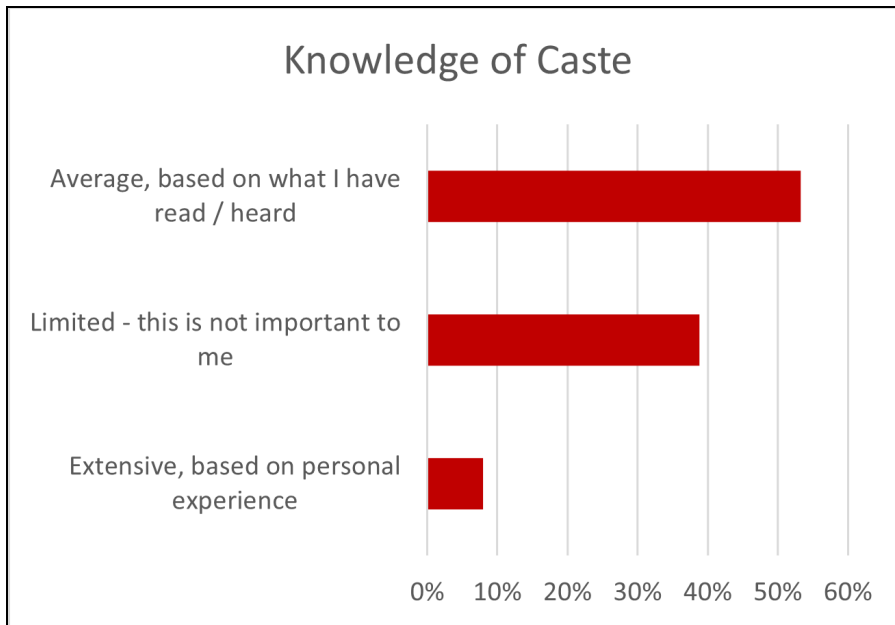
Overwhelming majorities either have average knowledge of the system or do not find it important. Of those who report knowledge based on "personal" experience, only the Millennial and Gen-Z cohorts report it in any significant number. This is merely an awareness of the idea of caste, not discrimination based on caste.

5. How does an American learn about caste?

The survey also explored the source of information about the caste system for most Americans.

First Introduction to Caste chart showing cohorts: All, Silent Generation (1928-1945), Baby Boomer (1946-1964), Gen X (1965-1981), Millennial (1982-1999), Gen Z (2000 and later), with categories Middle School, High School, College, Workplace, Other.
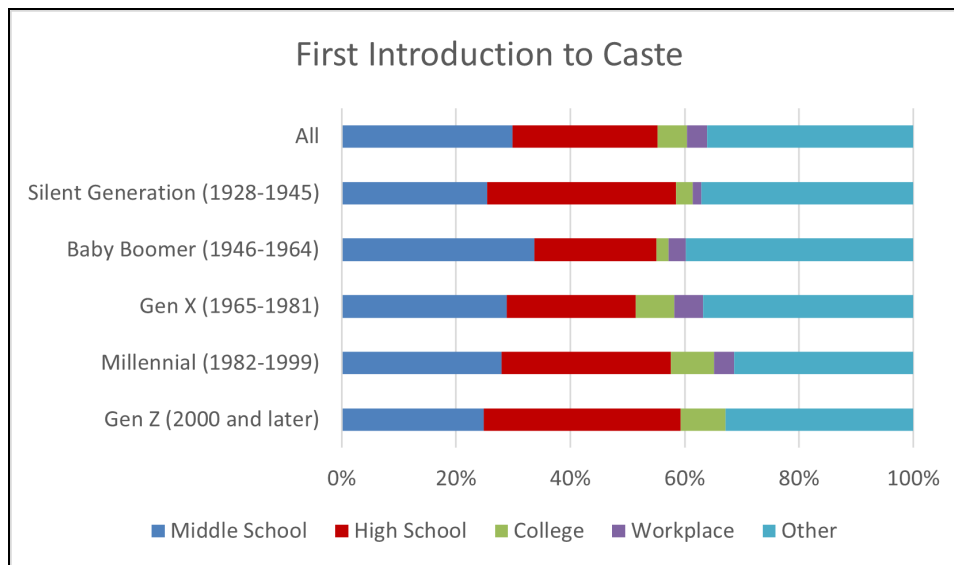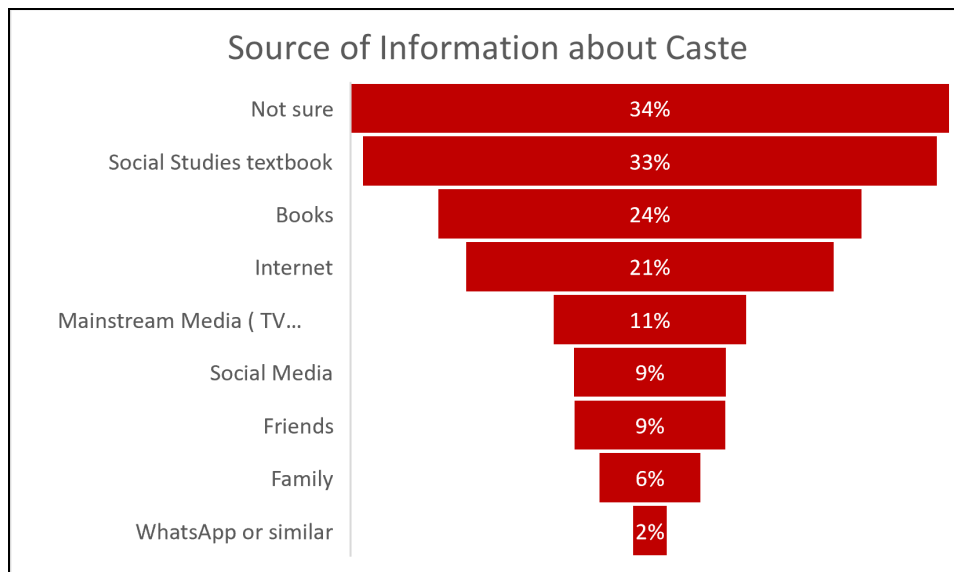
More than half the respondents across all cohorts had been introduced to the caste system by the time they graduated high school. If caste discussions were as widespread in the workspace or college campuses as it is claimed to be, surely more people would have first heard it in their workplace (instead of "other").

6. How many castes?

How Many Castes
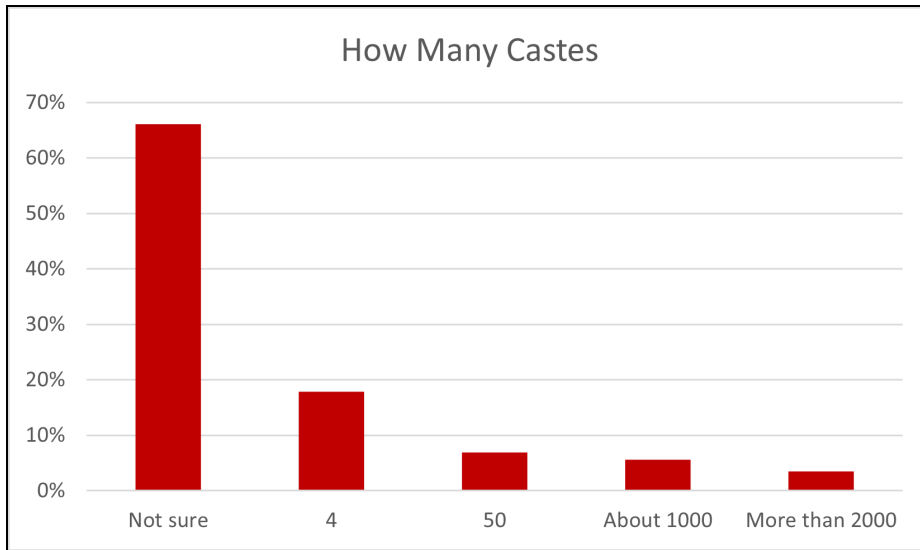
An overwhelming majority of Americans surveyed did not know the sheer number of castes. Out of the ones that claimed to have some knowledge, a majority indicated that there are only four castes. This is consistent with the dominant narrative around the caste system and what Americans learn in school textbooks.

Conclusion

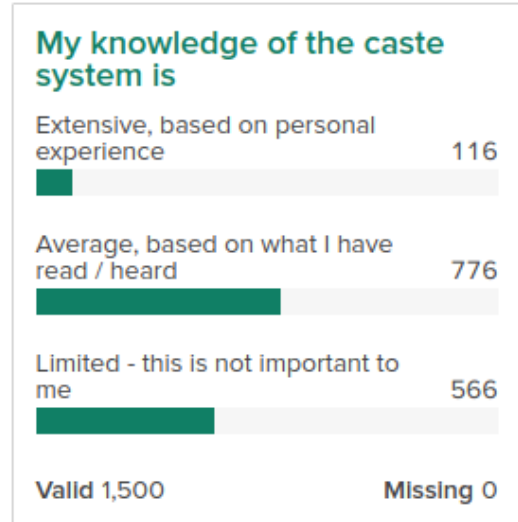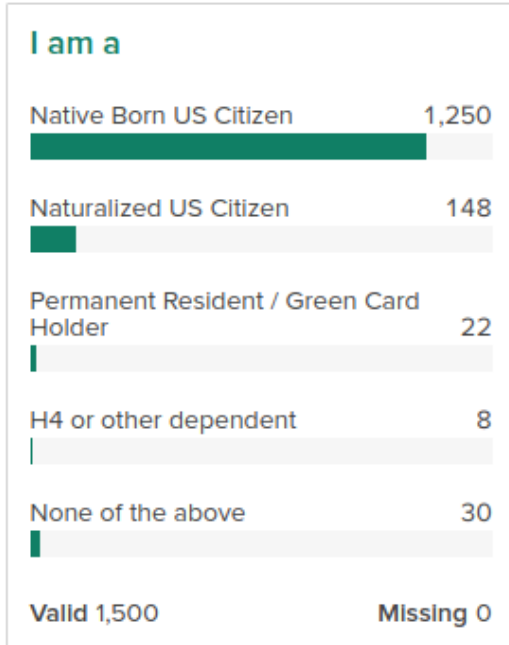The survey results clearly demonstrate that most Americans associate caste with Hinduism and India. Most ordinary Americans simply do not encounter caste in any meaningful way. Much of the information about the caste system is sourced from middle and high school textbooks. This is further borne out by the survey findings which show that people think there are four castes when in reality there are thousands of castes along with more than 25,000 "sub-castes" according to some sources and a staggering 4.6 Million castes, sub-castes, clans, etc. according to the 2011 socio-economic census of India.

The survey findings reject the idea that caste based discrimination can be easily identified by external markers. The diaspora cannot be separated neatly into four castes with "upper caste" oppressors and "lower caste" oppressed based on extraneous characteristics such as last name.

A deeper, statistically valid study of the actual prevalence of caste based systems of discrimination in America is warranted before rushing to pass laws outlawing it and pinning the (mythical) discrimination on Hindus from India who call America their home. Passing laws and policies based on inaccurate or anecdotal information is also unethical and can lead to violations of civil rights, targeting and profiling of Hindu Americans and other micro minorities. Specious arguments that caste laws do not target Hindus or people of Indian origin are rejected with the results of this statistically valid survey.

Appendix: Survey Raw Data

I am a

Native Born US Citizen	1,250
Naturalized US Citizen	148
Permanent Resident / Green Card Holder	22
H4 or other dependent	8
None of the above	30

Valid 1,500   **Missing** 0

My knowledge of the caste system is

Extensive, based on personal experience	116
Average, based on what I have read / heard	776
Limited - this is not important to me	566

Valid 1,500   **Missing** 0

Which country or countries do you associate the caste system with?

Country	Count
Mexico	91
United Kingdom	110
Japan	115
India	871
Pakistan	333
Nepal	228
Bangladesh	289
Sri Lanka	253

Valid 1,500   **Missing 0**

I can recognize caste distinction between people based on (select all...

Educational Level	11%
Facial features	6%
Food preferences	6%
Last Name	9%
Skin tone	10%
Speech and / or dialect	13%
Geographical region / ancestral village	23%
Hair texture	4%
None of the above	63%

Valid 1,500   **Missing** 0

Select as many Dalits you are able to identify from the list below

	Count
Anuj Parihar	44
Nanak Sharma	29
Vadilal Yadav	29
Harmeet Solanki	24
Yogesh Patel	44
Harsha Raj	39
Sudakar Sundarrajan	33
Raksha Gosain	27
Soumya Bangali	19
Krishna Kohli	26
Nita Nayak	14
Prem Pariyar	31
Shilpa Sawant	25
Not sure	1,323
Unweighted N	1,500

I learned about the caste system from (select all that apply)

Internet	307
Social Media	127
Mainstream Media (TV stations, radio)	161
WhatsApp or similar	28
Friends	126
Family	84
Books	355
Social Studies textbook	480
Not sure	501

Valid 1,500   **Missing** 0

When did you FIRST hear about the caste system?

Middle School	437
High School	368
College	76
Workplace	52
Other	526

Valid 1,500   **Missing** 0

In your opinion, how many castes are there?

4	260
50	100
About 1000	82
More than 2000	51
Not sure	964

Valid 1,500   **Missing** 0