

Begumpura

A LAND WITHOUT SORROWS



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The regal realm with the sorrowless name:

they call it Begumpura, a place with no pain,

No taxes or cares, none owns property there,

no wrongdoing, worry, terror, or torture.

Oh, my brother, I've come to take it as my own,

my distant home where everything is right.

That imperial kingdom is rich and secure,

where none are third or second – all are one;

They do this or that, they walk where they wish,

they stroll through fabled palaces unchallenged.

Oh, says Ravidas, a tanner now set free,

those who walk beside me are my friends.

- GURU RAVIDAS

Note: Translated from Punjabi to English

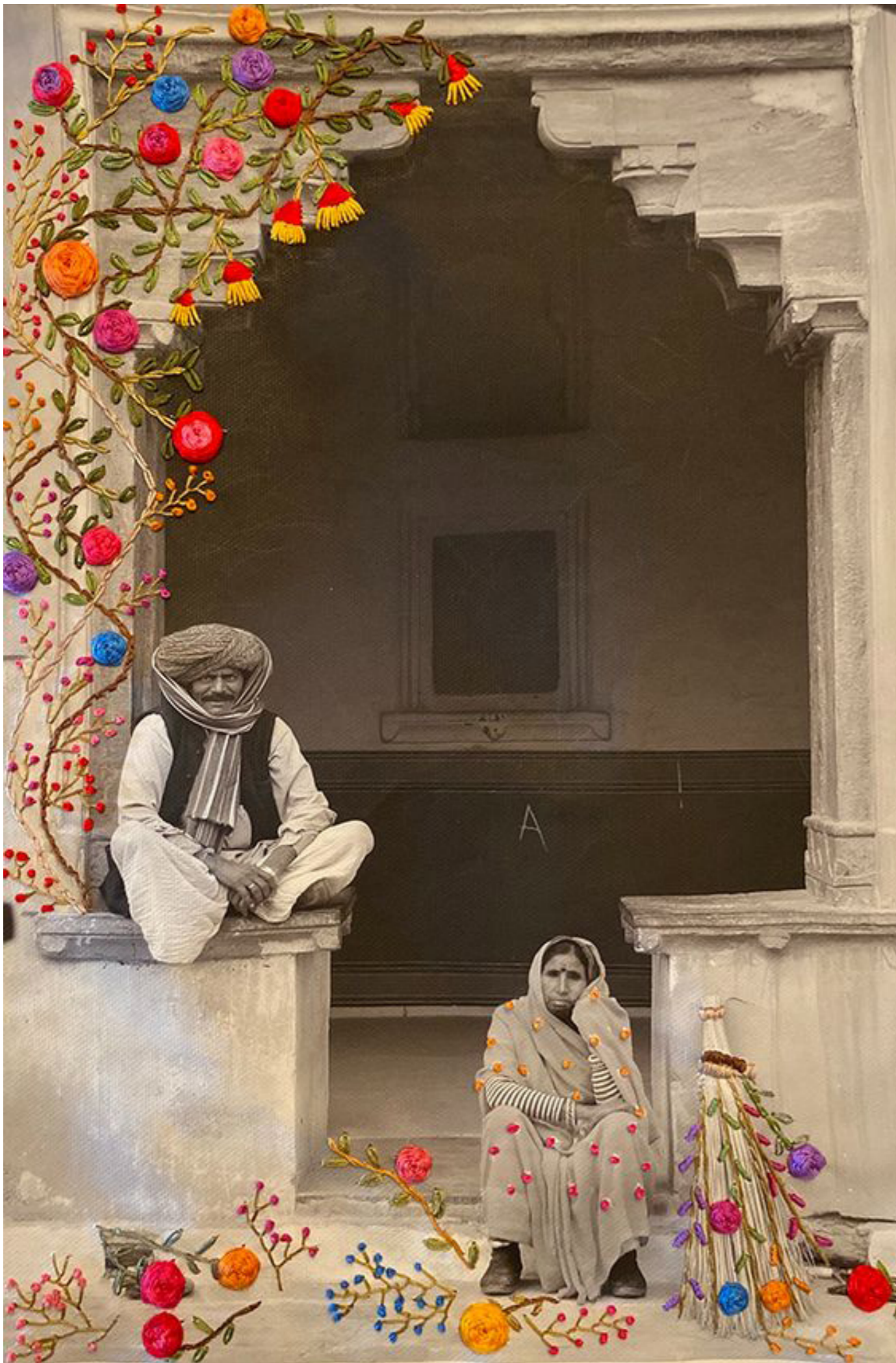


Figure 1, Artwork Credit: Mylene Rizzo, Image Source: Pinterest

Begumpura is a stateless, classless, casteless society imagined by poet Guru Ravidas in his poems written around 500 years ago in India. It is an imagination against caste, class, state, Brahmanical hierarchies, and patriarchy. A society living in harmony and free from all forms of discrimination.

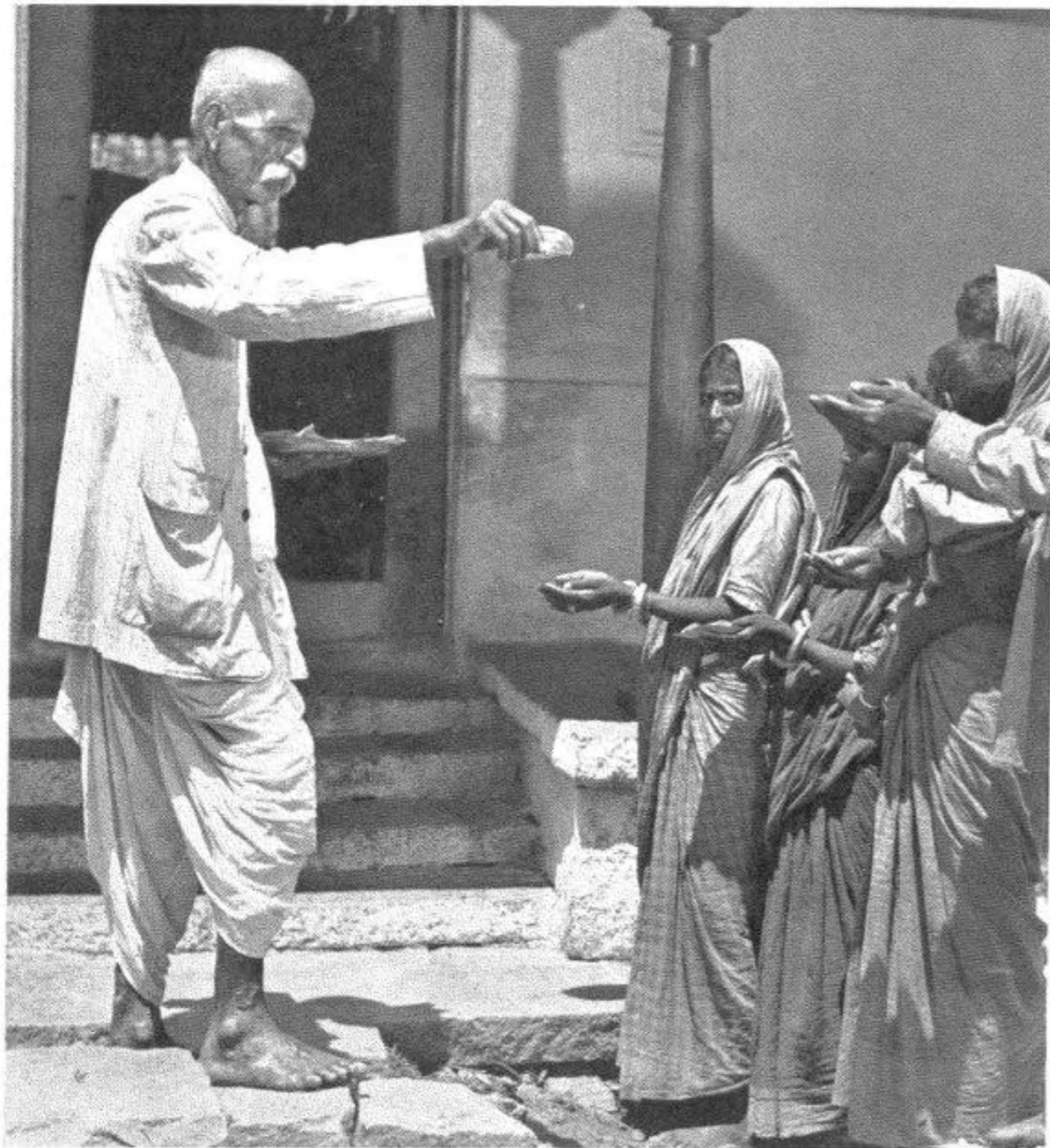
Guru Ravidas's poems against untouchability, caste, and social injustice have long been a source of strength for the downtrodden to drive social change. It was possibly the first image of an anarchist utopia in Indian literature. It became the guiding light for anti-caste intellectuals for imagining the society that they aspire to create.

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Context & Framing



The wages of untouchables are wrapped in a leaf and dropped from a safe distance into their hands.

Figure 2, Image Source: Quora

WHAT'S THE SOCIAL ISSUE

Caste is a 3000-year-old system of vertical hierarchy outlined in ancient Hindu mytholog. The classification of society into different social groups, traditionally known as “*varnas*” are further divided into numerous sub-castes or “*jatis*”. The caste system’s origins are attributed to the cosmic being Brahma. According to legend, the four main castes emerged from different parts of Brahma’s body, which classifies people into four main classes: *Brahmins* (priests and scholars), *Kshatriyas* (warriors and rulers), *Vaishyas* (merchants and farmers), and *Shudras* (laborers and servants). Below these four varnas are the Dalits, formerly known as “untouchables,” who were historically the lowest in hierarchy system and often subjected to social discrimination and oppression.

Caste is traditionally determined by birth, and one’s caste largely determines one’s social status, occupation, and even marriage prospects. This system has been deeply ingrained in Indian society, influencing relationships, politics, and economic opportunities. Over the years, efforts have been made to reform and eradicate the caste system, particularly through legislation and affirmative action policies aimed at uplifting marginalized caste communities. Despite these efforts, caste-based discrimination and prejudices continue to persist in various aspects of Indian society. It’s important to note that while the caste system has historical and cultural significance in India, it has also been a source of social inequality and injustice. Many Indians today advocate for a more inclusive and egalitarian society transcending caste boundaries.

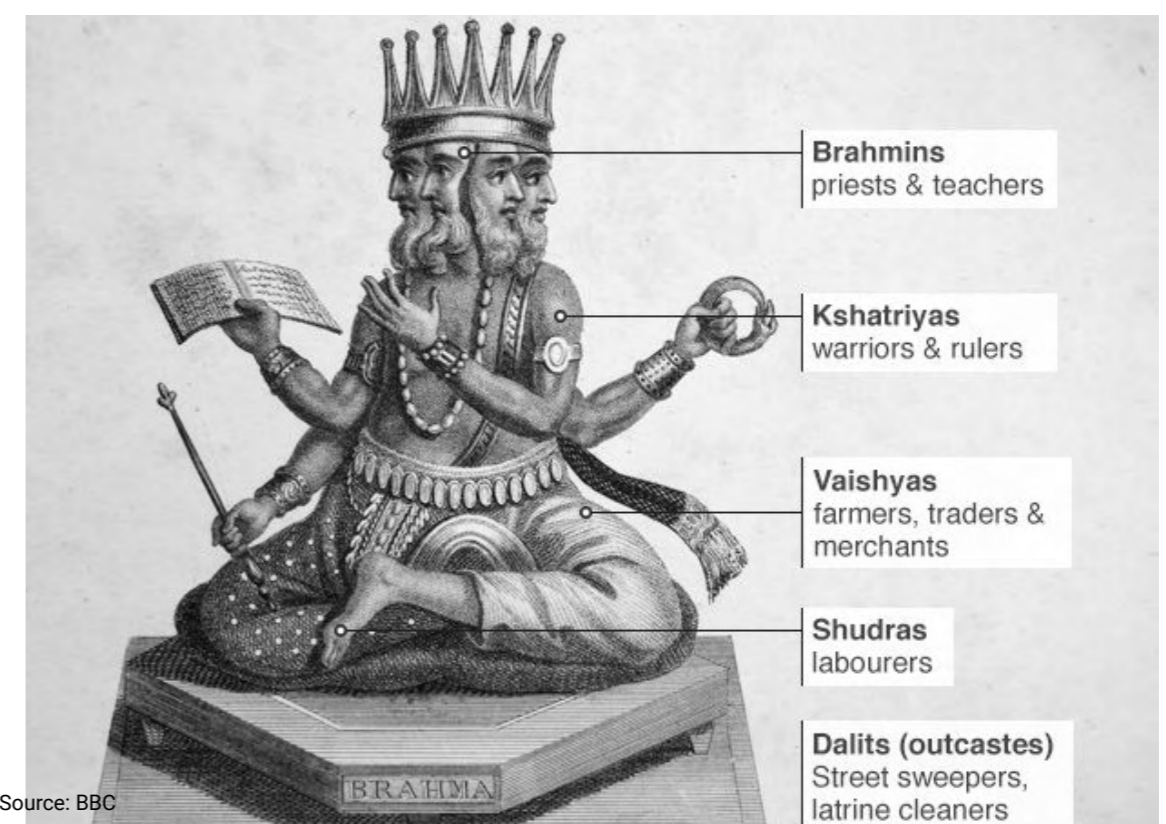


Figure 3, Image Source: BBC



Introduction



I moved to New York City in the fall of 2022, thinking this might be close to Begumpura as this is the “greatest city in the world”, hoping for a fresh start away from caste distinctions, but I soon realized that it existed here too. I learnt this is a mental model that travels with people, transcending geographical boundaries.

CASTE APARTHEID IN THE USA

In 2020, a Dalit engineer filed a lawsuit against Cisco, alleging caste-based discrimination and harassment in the workplace. This case brought attention to the issue of caste discrimination among South Asian communities in the United States, particularly within the tech industry [2].

Caste discrimination, deeply rooted in South Asian society, extends beyond the borders of countries like India and Nepal, impacting diaspora communities around the world. However, there is limited awareness and legal recognition of this issue in the US. The lack of specific laws addressing caste discrimination has left many Dalit individuals vulnerable to mistreatment and harassment without legal recourse.

DALIT RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN SEATTLE

In response to the lack of legal protections and recognition of caste-based discrimination, the Dalit Rights Movement began to gain traction on the West Coast of the US in 2020. This movement seeks to raise awareness about caste apartheid and advocate for legal protections for Dalit individuals facing discrimination in various spheres of life, including employment, education, and housing.

SB 403: 2023 CASTE BAN LAW

A significant testament to this advocacy was the Seattle's caste ban law in 2023 [3]. California's SB 403, which aimed to ban caste-based discrimination, was passed by the state legislature but ultimately vetoed by Governor Gavin Newsom on October 7, 2023.

Moreover, the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) is often used as an umbrella term to encompass diverse racial and ethnic minority groups. However, it fails to capture the distinct experiences and challenges faced by Dalit individuals and other caste-oppressed communities within the larger framework of racial justice movements.

Newsom argued that existing laws already cover such discrimination under ancestry and other protected categories

Furthermore, the Dalit Rights Movement seeks to challenge existing narratives within the broader racial justice movement, advocating for intersectional approaches that acknowledge the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression, including caste-based discrimination. The movement endeavors to create a more inclusive and equitable society for all marginalized groups, including Dalit individuals and other oppressed communities, through protests, advocacy campaigns, and community outreach initiatives.



Figure 6: California state Senator Aisha Wahab, centre, stands with supporters of SB 403 in the state capital Sacramento in March 2023, [File: Jose Luis Villegas/AP Photo]
Image Source: Al Jazeera



Figure 7: Artwork by Ishaan Gupta
Image Source: Pinterest

My Positionality

MOTIVATION FOR THIS PROJECT



Figure 8: Haryana, India



Figure 9: Agricultural Land, Haryana



I grew up in Haryana, a northern state of India, renowned for its lush green landscapes, and thriving agricultural sector. From a family of academicians, which includes teachers, professors, and students, I am the third generation in my lineage to pursue education. Prior to this, my great-grandfather worked as a leather worker in the early 1900s. It may seem intriguing that I come from a lineage of artisans. However, this realization struck me when I acknowledged my family's history of caste oppression.

Historically considered untouchable, we are now classified as Dalits, a term meaning "broken," or categorized as Scheduled Castes in India. Caste is an inherent aspect of one's identity, inherited at birth, permeating every facet of life, and remains indelible.

I am a dancer and Industrial Designer turned Social Designer. Before joining SVA DSI, I worked with the traditional crafts community in Haryana during the pandemic. In 2020, this crafts community was on the verge of extinction. I was fortunate to collaborate with them and co-design products that ensured sustainable livelihoods for artisans. We co-created jewelry and wall hangings and established a platform where artisans could sell their products without intermediaries.

I observed the male-dominated society first-hand during my two years working with them. The hierarchy became visible, and I was also exposed to the caste system very intimately.

Over the years, I have learned to survive the caste system by hiding my identity. When I moved to the USA, I thought I would not observe caste-based discrimination since it is the land of the free. However, to my surprise, the caste system exists here as well. Through my research, I discovered that it is a mental model that geographical boundaries cannot confine.

I want to honor my lived experiences and use my expertise as a designer and a researcher to explore this topic further.



Figure 10: Bhavya, Karnal, 2001



Figure 11: Bhavya, Karnal, 2021



Based on my experiences, and learning so far I think...

THERE IS A LACK OF AWARENESS AND RECKONING IN THE WAY CASTE SHOWS UP WITHIN THE INDIAN DIASPORA IN THE USA.

Since early childhood, I have unknowingly learned skills to hide my caste and navigate the world accordingly. This phenomenon is called- Passing. "Passing" in the Indian caste system refers to individuals hiding or altering their caste identity to gain social or economic advantages associated with a higher caste. It reflects the deep-rooted discrimination and prejudice in society but doesn't address the underlying issues of caste inequality. Passing is also a form of self-erasure to be able to assimilate into the mainstream culture. It also restricts individuals from unleashing their full potential in personal and professional life.

During my internship at Moving Rasa LLC, in the summer of 2023, through body movement healing practices and facilitated dialogue around healing helped in come to terms with my own identity. This coupled with self-reflection practice helped me in my journey of building resilience and celebrating my identity. I felt much more comfortable and grounded. I hope people from my community can experience this joy, and share it with others.



Figure 12: Last Day of Moving Rasa Retreat, Spanish Harlem, NYC, June 2023
Clicked by Mikel Washington

HOW MIGHT WE CREATE COMMUNITIES WITH EMBODIED HEALING* PRACTICES FOR PEOPLE AFFECTED BY THE CASTE APARTHEID HERE IN THE USA?

Thesis Statment

*Healing from the intergenerational trauma from caste-based violence, and oppression.

THESIS PARTNER

This thesis is done in collaboration with Moving Rasa LLC. It is an organization based in Spanish Harlem, New York City.

Moving Rasa is an improvisational movement form and contemplative practice that may be practiced anywhere. Movers connect their inner world to their outer movement and how it is organized in relation to others, objects, and the environment. In particular, movers are supported to connect to their *Rasa*.

Andrew Suseno, the founder of Moving Rasa is a community organizer, emergent author, a doctor of Physical Therapy, a Somatic movement educator, dance artist, He has certifications as an Orthopedic Manual Therapist, Laban movement Analyst, and Feldenkrais practitioner. He has studied movement and the body for many years including spring board diving, martial arts, contact improvisation and modern dance. Andrew's work has reached communities of color across the age and ability spectrum and carves out a space for others to engage in somatics and improvisation in a People of Color centered way.



Figure 13: Logo, Moving Rasa LLC
Source: Moving Rasa LLC



Figure 14: Andrew Suseno, Founder, Moving Rasa LLC



Figure 15: Artwork by Ishaan Gupta
Image Source: Pinterest

Primary Research

STUDY ACROSS USA AND INDIA

For primary research, and to understand the issue and its complexity from community members, and experts. The following research methodologies were applied:

- One on one interviews with community members were conducted to understand their lived experiences, perceptions and perspective on the caste system.
- Community gatherings were hosted in different formats: potluck, movie screenings, book clubs to understand their lived experiences, perceptions and perspective on the caste system.
- I also visited caste segregated temples in Queens, New York City, and in India to research how caste based segregation still persists.
- I also attended somatic workshops, to understand how body movement based healing works, and how people engage with it.
- Interviews with subject experts were conducted to understand the complexity of the issue.

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

1. Violence has been internalized to a deep level, and it has been normalized. Violence is not only in verbal communication but also physical.
2. This violence is not just from the dominant class to suppressed communities, but internally within the suppressed communities as well.
3. The shared feeling in the members from suppressed communities that- their bodies are not their own!
4. There is not much awareness about caste apartheid and how it operated in the diaspora.
5. The Indian diaspora has a monolithic representation dominated by historically caste-privileged people and hence erasure of marginalized communities.

After my collaboration with Andrew, I expanded my research lens. I started reading more about somatics and the parallels between race and caste, and I attended Moving Rasa workshops and events. Over a year, the goal remained the same - to understand different mental models people have regarding caste apartheid, and how they engage with this knowingly or unknowingly. Moreover, what are the gaps in the systems where I can seek opportunities for intervention?

Following the research insight, three gap areas were identified:

1. Awareness about the caste-system as a humanitarian crisis is needed.
2. Acknowledging the violence and the system that caused it- the Caste Apartheid.
3. Strategizing how might we facilitate historically marginalized community to re-gain their power, autonomy.



Figure 16, Artwork Credit: Mylene Rizzo, Image Source: Pinterest

Prototypes

BOOKCLUBS

HYPOTHESIS: The hypothesis driving this prototype was rooted in the recognition of the layered, nuanced, and complex nature of the concept of caste apartheid, coupled with a perceived lack of awareness about it in the USA. It was also noted that even within the South Asian diaspora, there was limited awareness of its contemporary manifestations.

APPROACH: Bookclubs were organized, and held twice a month, so that a space of discussion around the topic could be opened.

WHAT WORKED: The book club sessions primarily drew students from prestigious institutions such as SVA, Parsons, NYU, and Columbia, forming a relatively homogeneous group characterized by similar mindsets and academic approaches. Despite this homogeneity, the book club provided a valuable space for intellectual discourse, skill development, and community building.

WHAT DID NOT WORK: The homogeneous nature of the book club attendees, while conducive to academic discourse, posed challenges in terms of reaching a broader audience and fostering diverse perspectives. This limitation highlights the need for more inclusive outreach strategies to engage individuals from diverse backgrounds within the South Asian diaspora and beyond.

POTLUCK GATHERINGS

HYPOTHESIS:

Food is a great way to bring community together. The Potluck is for a communal gathering to reflect, bond and engage in discussion.

APPROACH: Potlucks were hosted once a month, as an attempt to bring diverse cultures, identities and backgrounds in a room through food and discussions over food.

WHAT WORKED:

The community showed up, there were discussions around food, narratives of the about the diverse food cultures.

WHAT DID NOT WORK:

The conversation were limited, as there was a conspicuous absence of intentional discourse surrounding the caste system. It appeared as though individuals were sidestepping the topic, perhaps out of discomfort or reluctance to engage with its complexities.

CULTURALLY SPECIFIC SOMATICS

HYPOTHESIS:

That culturally specific Somatic Framework, would encourage community to engage in body movement based healing practices. Culturally specific somatic practices integrate somatic therapy techniques with the cultural beliefs and practices of a specific community or group, respecting their cultural context to provide more relevant and effective therapy.

INSIGHTS:

It was observed that the turnout was very low, and attendees mentioned that they did not resonate with this approach. Upon further inquiry, it was learned that therapy was perceived as a stigmatized word within the community, and Somatics was a very new approach for them, with limited awareness.



Figure 17, Artwork Credit: Mylene Rizzo, Image Source: Pinterest

INSIGHTS

1. The community hesitates to address caste apartheid, as it evokes strong emotions, deep-seated traumas, and uncomfortable feelings that remain unnamed.
2. Engaging in discussions on these topics is difficult when simply sitting and talking. A grounding activity is needed to facilitate these conversations.
3. People often become defensive or aggressive when discussing the caste system, influenced by their positionality. Their nervous systems prevent them from engaging with openness and empathy.
4. Therapy and healing carry a stigma, and even acknowledging or discussing the issues causing trauma is often avoided.
5. The impact of the caste system is insufficiently acknowledged and discussed, preventing a full understanding of its depth. Those who recognize and understand its effects often cannot engage in these conversations due to unresolved emotions, complex feelings about hiding their identity, and the associated shame, helplessness, and grief.

Based on these insights, I realized there is a gap- there is a need for a space that can be safe yet brave, a space where people can come together, eat, talk, laugh, discuss, debate, reflect, learn, and unlearn about the caste system openly. A space where they are not judged, mocked, accused, or treated less as humans. A space, where people can talk and engage in these heavy topics from a place of curiosity, compassion, and openness. A space where people from different backgrounds, can come together share and hear experiences, and grow together. And to address this gap- Creative Chai Chronicles was born.



Figure 18: Textile fragment of printed and mordant and resist-dyed cotton, possibly made in Gujarat.
Used for Creative visualization and depicting metaphor- fragement of broken system and societies
Source: Pinterest

What did I hear from the community?

I went back to the community and asked them what healing means to them, how they would like to heal, and how we can achieve that together.

There was a will to be able to talk about the caste apartheid not just within the community but with historically caste-privileged people.

That would be the first step to being able to talk about these issues without freezing, fighting, fawning, or going into flight mode.

That was OUR AHA moment, seemingly simple task, but I knew it was complex.

I continued to ponder:

What are we healing for?

What's the next step?

To continue to fight the caste apartheid, because the it isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

And if it is for that, why do we need to heal, we are still coping that even today in our own ways.

healing for me
means being able
to say my caste
in front of my friends,
and hold them
accountable if they
try to hide the fact.

to call my
neighbour
out for
separating
utensils.

fear that
my children
might experience
similar
discrimination

TO BE ABLE
TO REGULATE
MY EMOTIONS
BETTER ON
CONFRONTATION

I WANT TO
LOSE MY
FEAR OF
Being
"OUTED" ☹️

I want
to heal to
be able to
host those
discussion
around
caste.

Figure 19: Sticky Notes from a Gathering, December 2023

“HEALING IS ESSENTIAL
TO LIBERATION [4]

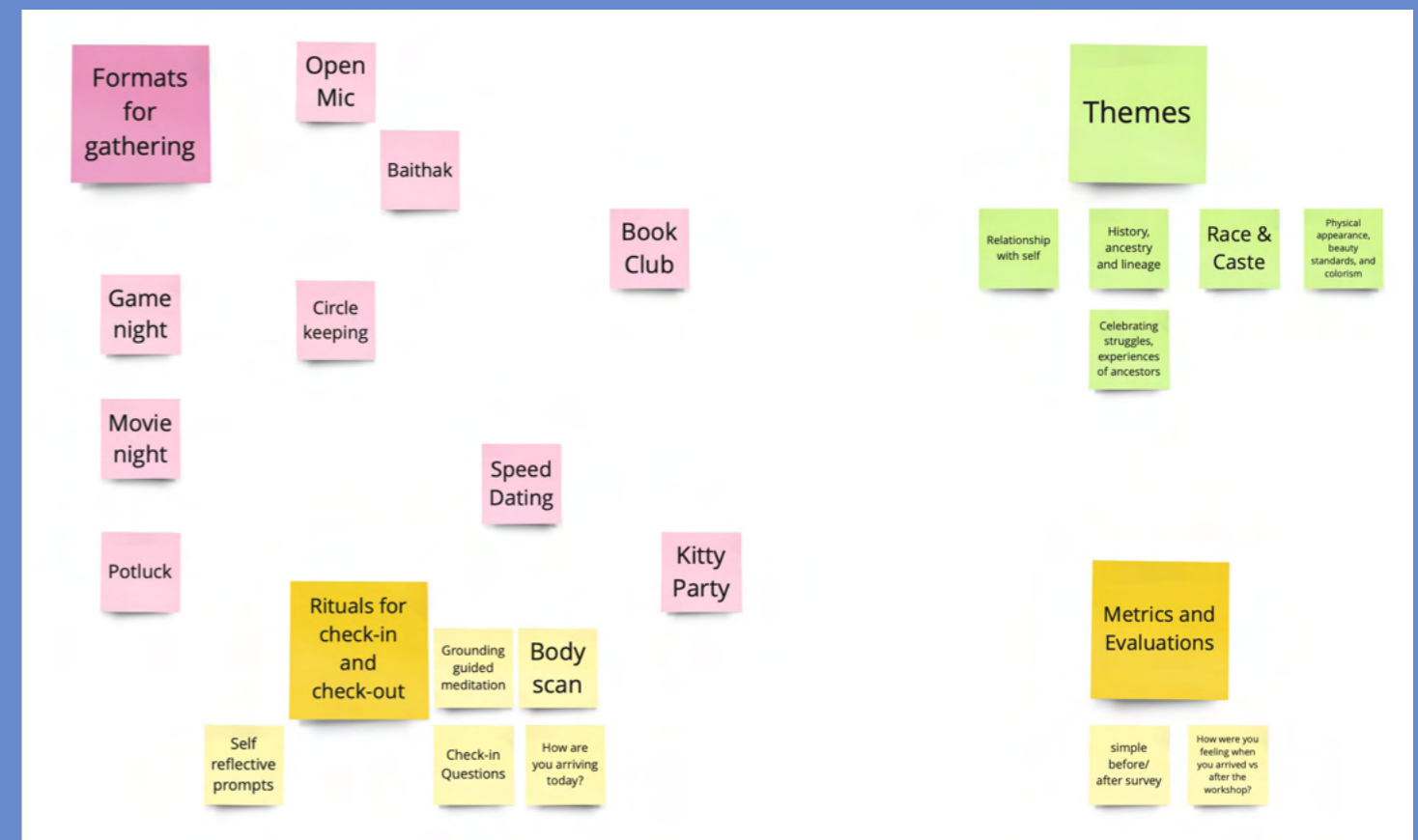
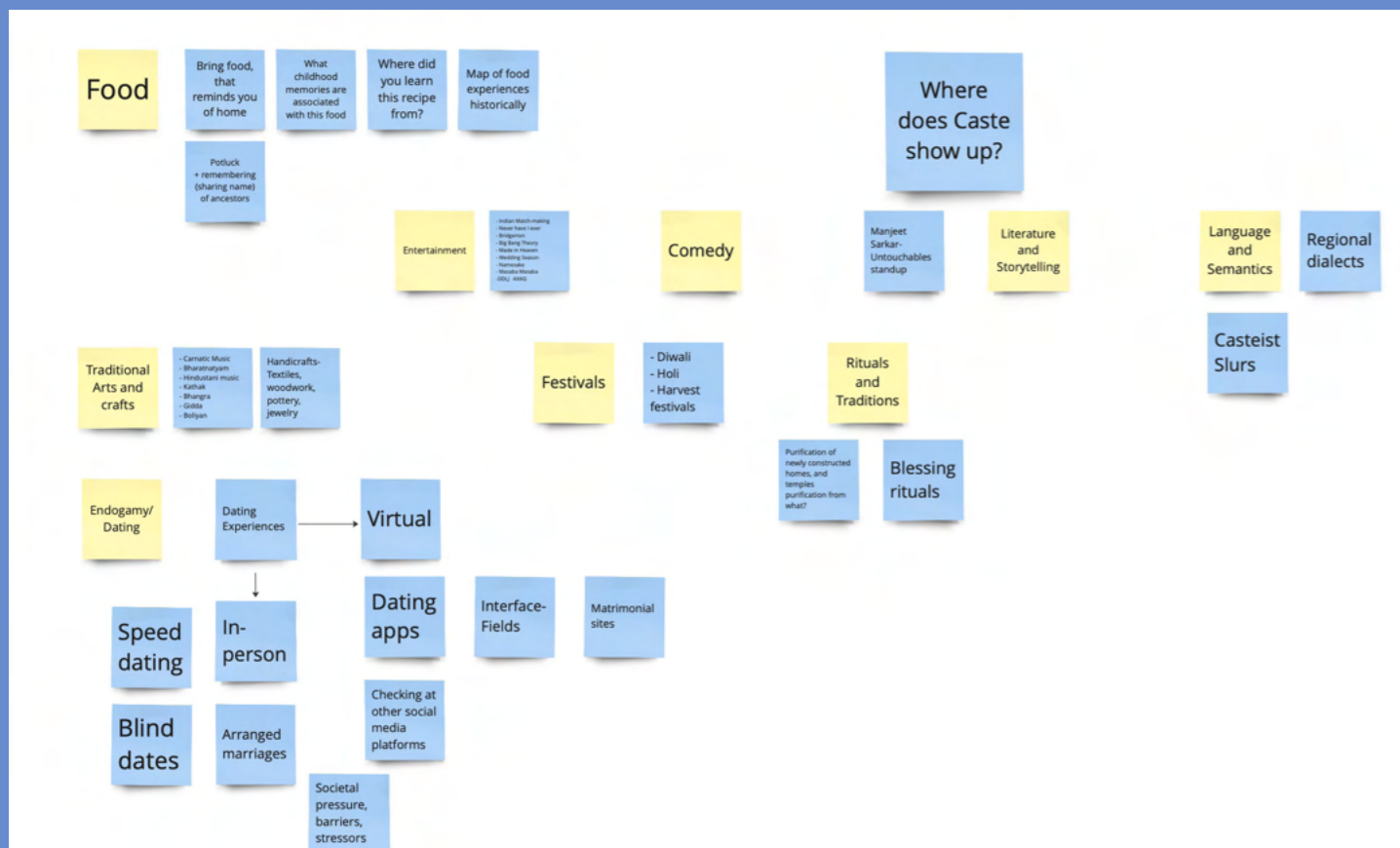


Figure 20: Brainstroming with Vandhana Jayaram

Source: Screenshot from Miro Board

DESIGN PROCESS

As I was testing the initial probes, I was also attending events, talks, exhibitions, and I happened to meet Vandhana Jayaram at an event. She is a Parsons MFA TD student, and doing her thesis on understanding the caste fragility. Her thesis is titled: "Fragile, Handle with Care: Understanding Caste Privilege in the South Asian Diaspora". We connected, and decided to continue this work together, as we were engaged for the same cause, doing the same work but from different positionalities.



Figure 21: With Vandhana, Chelsea, NYC

We wanted to start gathering to provide a space for courageous conversations on caste, but based on both our experiences we knew, we needed different entry point, and more inviting narrative. So we mapped down which all parts of our lives does the caste system influence- which is literally everything starting from access to resources, education, sanitation, marriage, employment, festivals and what not. We made buckets and decided on four key themes, which we thought would be relatable for the community and could act as an inviting entry point.

SO we flipped from CCC Being Courageous Conversations on Caste to being Creative Chai Chronicles.

CREATIVE: Gathering uses creative mediums such as drawing, writing, making art, body movement of expression, and reflection.

CHAI: A ritual amongst south Asians. we hoped to create an intimate space, where the group can build trust, bond, and discuss complex topics. So we added an element that is familiar to them and reminds them of home.

CHRONICLES: A gathering where people can share their lived experiences, and life stories, reflect

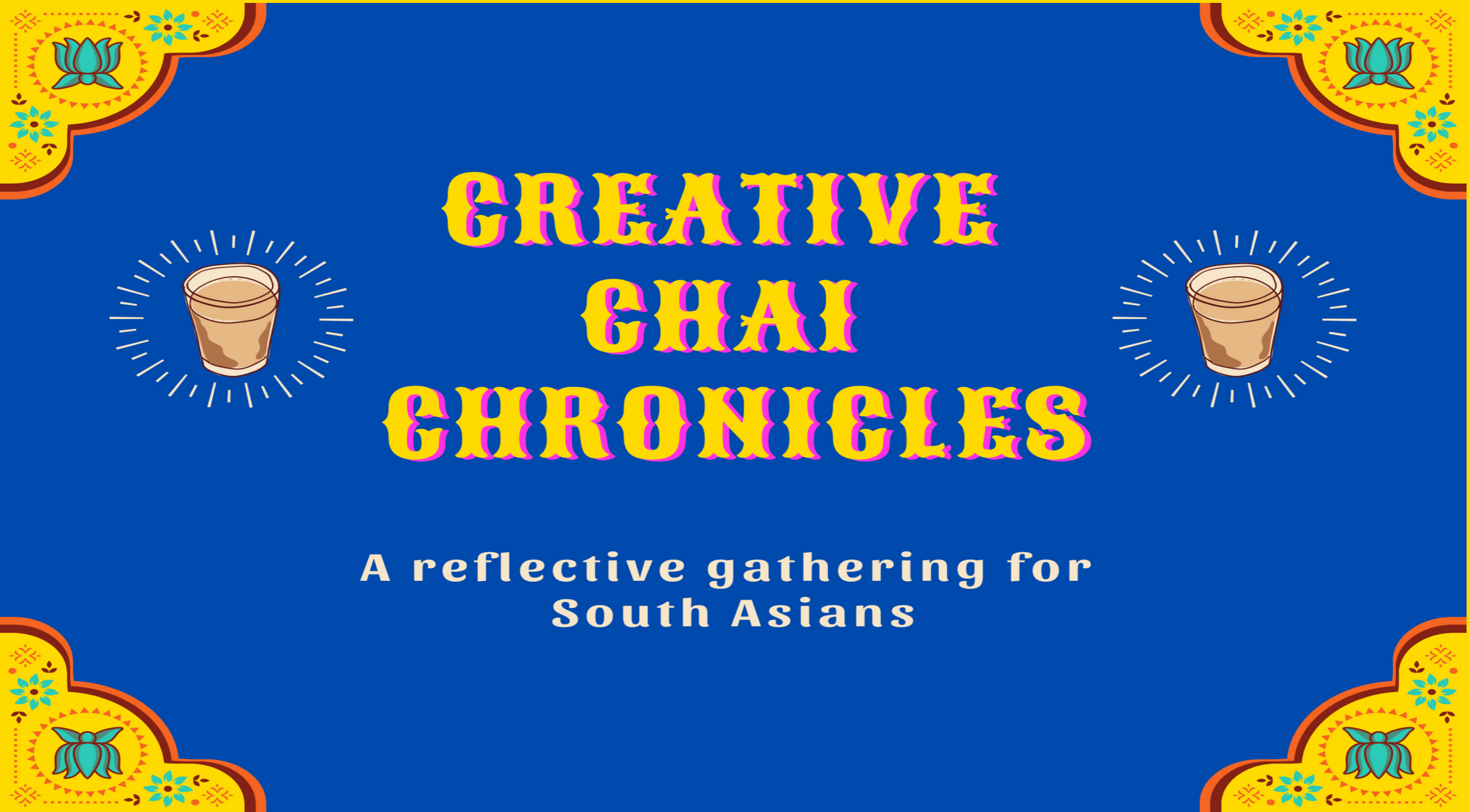


Figure 22: Creative Chai Chronicles Poster for Eventbrite

Intervention

CREATIVE CHAI CHRONICLES

Creative Chai Chronicles. The goal remained the same: how we might engage the South Asian community, in discussions, and reflective practices around caste? But instead of directly talking about caste we talked about different subthemes, that caste influences. We mapped down which aspects of our lives does caste system impacts, and how, we then categorized similar themes together. We finalized 3-4 themes that might entice, and excite the community to come and engage in a discussion. Some of these themes are dating and marriage, food cultures, and belonging as a South Asian in the USA.

HERE IS HOW WE PUBLICIZED THE EVENT :

Creative Chai Chronicles is a reflective space for South Asians. A space where South Asians can meet fellow like-minded individuals and reflect through different creative, making, and body movement exercises. Incentives for the community:

- A series of gatherings where South Asians in NYC, can come as they are- frazzled, tired, melancholic, happy. This gathering is for South Asian adults of all ethnic

backgrounds, religions, regions, and nationalities who are keen to explore their identity in New York City through creative artistic and movement-based practices with other South Asians. Discover a community

- Engage in thought-provoking discussions and activities designed to explore and understand the nuances of the South Asian identity in the United States
- Explore your artistic side and express yourself through various creative mediums in a welcoming space where all sides of you can belong. No familiarity with any artistic practices is required to participate, everyone is welcome here.
- Gain access to valuable resources, information, and tools to further explore and embrace your South Asian heritage and identity.
- Enjoy chai and South Asian snacks :)
- Take away creative artifacts you make.

TESTING

Initially, we planned a series of five gatherings, throughout March-April, 2024:

16th March: Belonging in the United States

22nd March: Belonging in the United States

6th April: Love & Identity

13th April: Flavors of Identity

20th April: Shared History,

Divergent experiences

We wanted to start from a broader perspective, and theme to invite a more diverse group of South Asians.



Creative Chai Chronicles

Figure 23

GATHERING 1



Figure 24: Creative Chai Chronicles Poster for Gathering 1

WHEN: 16 March 2024

WHERE: Brooklyn Public Library - Williamsburgh Branch, Marcy Avenue, Williamsburgh Community Room Brooklyn, NY 11211

THEME:

Sharing Stories of South Asian Life in America

CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND:

BIPOC- Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are often slammed together under this umbrella term BIPOC. This term is specifically used to recognize the unique challenges and histories of Black and Indigenous people, along with other people of color.[4]

Even though The term aims to encourage more understanding and respectful conversations about race. It often shows BIPOC communities in a monolithic way. Whereas the lived experiences, the background, the culture, and religion are so distinct. Within this bigger umbrella, South Asians is a large ethnic, with are also considered a part of “model minority” [5]. The term “model minority” in the United States commonly refers to a stereotype that depicts Asian Americans as a group that has succeeded economically, academically, and socially

above other minority groups, often overcoming significant discrimination. Originating in the 1960s, this concept has been criticized for oversimplifying the diversity within Asian American communities, masking real challenges such as socioeconomic disparities and mental health issues. Additionally, it can create unrealistic expectations within these communities and serve as a divisive tool among different racial groups, undermining efforts to address systemic inequality.

OBJECTIVE/ AIM:

The aim of hosting this gathering was to :

bring diverse perspectives on being a South Asian in New York City (USA). Exploring and embracing diversity beyond the monolithic ‘model minority’ label as we delve into the rich mosaic of experiences shaped by gender, caste, region, religion, and culture. Reflecting on assimilation, self-erasure, and survival techniques through pondering on these questions: What parts of ourselves do we embrace and what parts of ourselves do we erase and modify to blend in? What helps us stay rooted and what do we choose to leave behind in the United States?

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

9 people came, and out of it we only knew 3. It was a diverse set of people, from a yellow cab taxi driver to an engineer turned finance advisor, from 22 to 35 years old there was a range of people, who had vastly different experiences yet were connected by a thread of being South Asian.

ACTIVITIES:

We divided the 2 hours 30 min session into 4 main parts:
 Introductions, Settling in
 Community Agreements and Introducing the Purpose of the Gathering:

ACTIVITY 1: A 15-minute Guided meditation, with prompts of body scan, reflecting on the journey of migration from South Asia to the USA. Followed by a making activity where participants can write, draw, and make what came up for them. It could be feelings, themes, or words.

The prompt was to think about: What do they think their ancestors got with their things (tangible and intangible) when they were migrating? Out of those things, what things are still with the participants? Is it a burden or something that helps them stay rooted?

ACTIVITY 2 AND CLOSING: Based on the poem by George Ella Lyons, “Where I am from” that you have in your handout, we are going to make a collective poem together.

LEARNINGS:

- There is a need for a space for reflection and having deeper uncomfortable convos in the South Asian community - not many events and spaces are representative and inclusive especially not for marginalized communities.
- Movement-based activities are effective in building community, grounding, and helping to increase energy and enthusiasm
- A mix of individual introspective activities and collective activities are helpful if paced well.
- Guided meditations are effective if scripted with strategic pauses and time for people to imagine, ground, and think but also need to be placed strategically in a design (like not after a high-energy activity)
- Making activities seem useful and

people are open to making and crafting things to express and reflect.

- Finding a sweet spot between reflection, creativity, movement, and information, listening and sharing of stories (cater to different ways of learning and paying attention, (heart/mind/body/spirit).

WHAT CAN BE IMPROVED?

- We need to post on Eventbrite earlier (a week or so in advance) with a location, with Eventbrite marketing, and text participants along with emails to remind them about the event and get them to RSVP and confirm their attendance
- The location of Brooklyn attracts folks in Queens/ Brooklyn while Manhattan is more convenient for those in Jersey City, Manhattan
- We need a clearer agenda/plan to show people when inviting them via Eventbrite
- South Asians are interested in meeting with other South Asians to socialize as they don't get the opportunity much
- We need more incentives to ensure that they show up if they have registered
- Making it paid partly for incentivising.
- Getting external speakers/collaborators
- Networking/speed friending portion of the gathering
- Holding it at a cafe where food is available



Figure 25: Image from Gathering 1, Williamsburgh

ARTIFACTS FROM GATHERING 1



Figure 26: Bags were used for metaphorical depiction, images of bags made by participants, unveiling different aspects of their lives, each bag shares a different perspective and a unique story.



Figure 27: Bags were used for metaphorical depiction, images of bags made by participants, unveiling different aspects of their lives, each bag shares a different perspective and a unique story.

GATHERING 2



Figure 28: Creative Chai Chronicles Poster for Gathering 2

WHEN: 6th April, 2024

WHERE: Oyster Classroom, Pier 57
Community Classrooms at Pier 57 New York,
NY 10011

THEME:

Love & Identity: Navigating Dating & Marriage
in the South Asian Diaspora

CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND

Navigating love, dating, and marriage within the South Asian diaspora in the United States is deeply complex due to a mix of cultural, social, and personal factors. Influences such as caste, class, gender norms, and sexuality play significant roles, often conflicting with personal aspirations and societal expectations. Balancing these elements with traditional values and the individualistic culture of America makes finding a partner particularly challenging for many South Asians, leading to a nuanced and difficult path in their relationship journeys.[7]

OBJECTIVE/ AIM:

To understand the multifaceted dimensions of love, relationships, and cultural expectations in the diaspora.

How caste impacts or influences dating, and romantic relationships of the community.

Testing if community members are aware of the caste implications on their decision-making of a life partner, And if yes to what extent, and how much of it is conscious or unconscious is decision-making
If no, then how do they perceive it, what are the narratives they use to justify their decision-making (to hide the caste-based implications, intentionally or unintentionally).

PARTICIPANTS

6 Participants

Age range: 20- 38 years.

Profession: Students, professionals

Mostly Indian Origin South Asians.

FRAMING THE EVENT:

To invite participants and promote the event, we framed the gathering as an exploration of the following themes and topics:

- Dynamics of modern matchmaking within the diasporic context whether through dating apps, arranged dates, matchmakers, and matrimonial websites.
- Unpack the intersections of gender norms, caste dynamics, sexuality, and religious influences in dating and marriage considerations and experiences.
- Reflect on your ideals of romantic relationships and how they align (or clash) with family and community expectations. Explore the nuances of diaspora and migration, and how they shape perceptions of romantic relationships.

ACTIVITIES:

We divided the 2 hours 30 min session into 5 main parts:

- Introductions, Settling in
- Community Agreements and Introducing the Purpose of the Gathering.
- Activity 1: The participants were given printed artifacts which included memes, news articles, social media posts, and research papers on the themes of dating and marriage in the diaspora. The artifacts touched on the themes of caste, gender, sexuality, culture, and heritage. The participants were given 20 minutes to discuss. The objective of this activity was to Help to ground participants and get them to think about the larger issues (especially caste) that the topic of dating and marriage revolves around in the diaspora.
- Activity 2, Making Dating/Matrimonial Profiles: The objective was to understand How do their experiences overlap with/align with familial and societal expectations?

- The participants were given two templates with these prompts: Imagine that your family/guardians/community that raised you has created a profile for who they see as your ideal match. What would it look like? Who is it? What socioeconomic background, educational qualifications, caste, class, religion and age would they be from? What personality, likes and dislikes would they have?
- After that participants were asked take a second template and make one that is based on what you would like in your ideal partner.
- This was followed by a discussion in circle setting to understand what came up for people.
- Closing activity, Love letter to self: Participants were asked to write a love letter to self.

WHAT WORKED?

Ending on a positive self love note.

The artifact activity worked out well, it helped participants to feel grounded and opened up space for discussion. As this allowed participants to talk about issues without talking about themselves or sharing their personal experiences.

The second activity, designing the bio-data brought a lot of things, emotions in the room. Participants mentioned what they are looking for in a partner, as compared to what their guardians, community elders would want.

ARTIFACTS FROM GATHERING 2

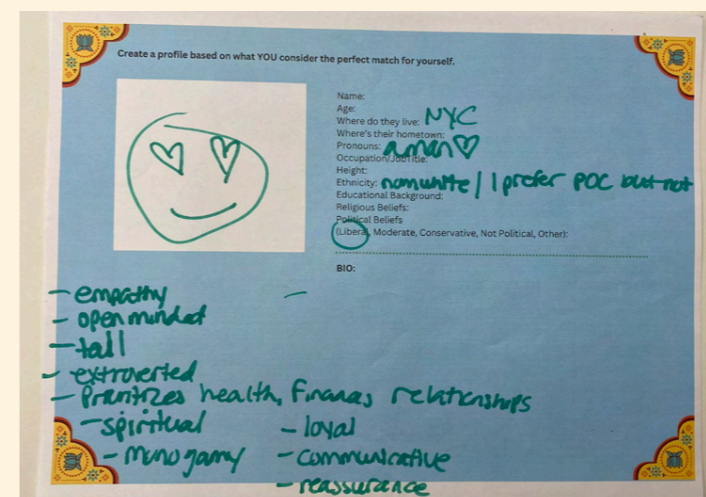
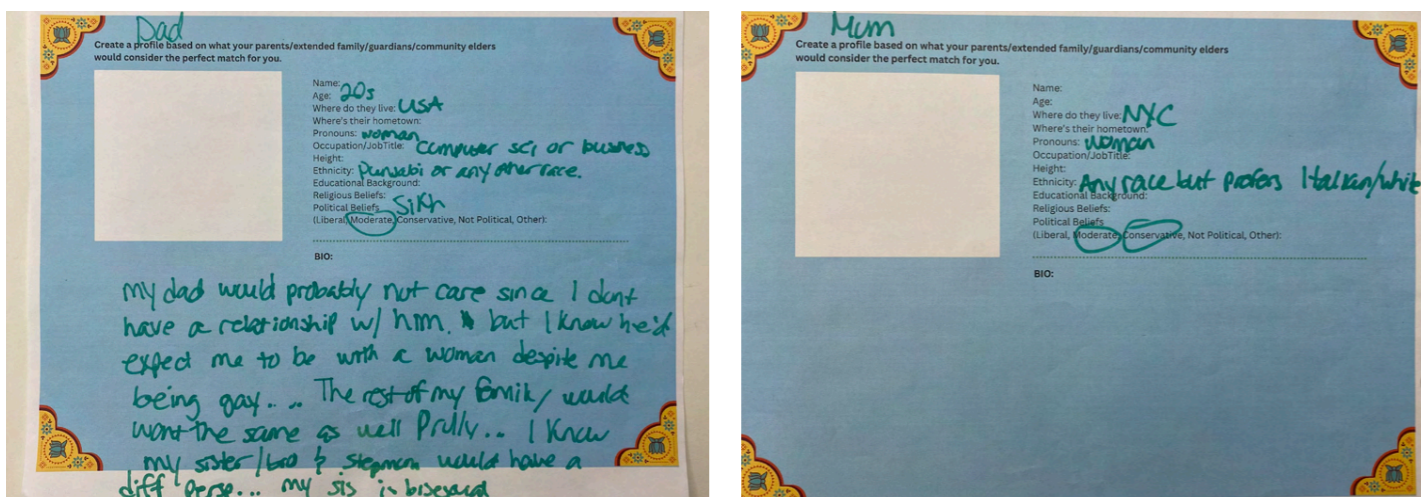
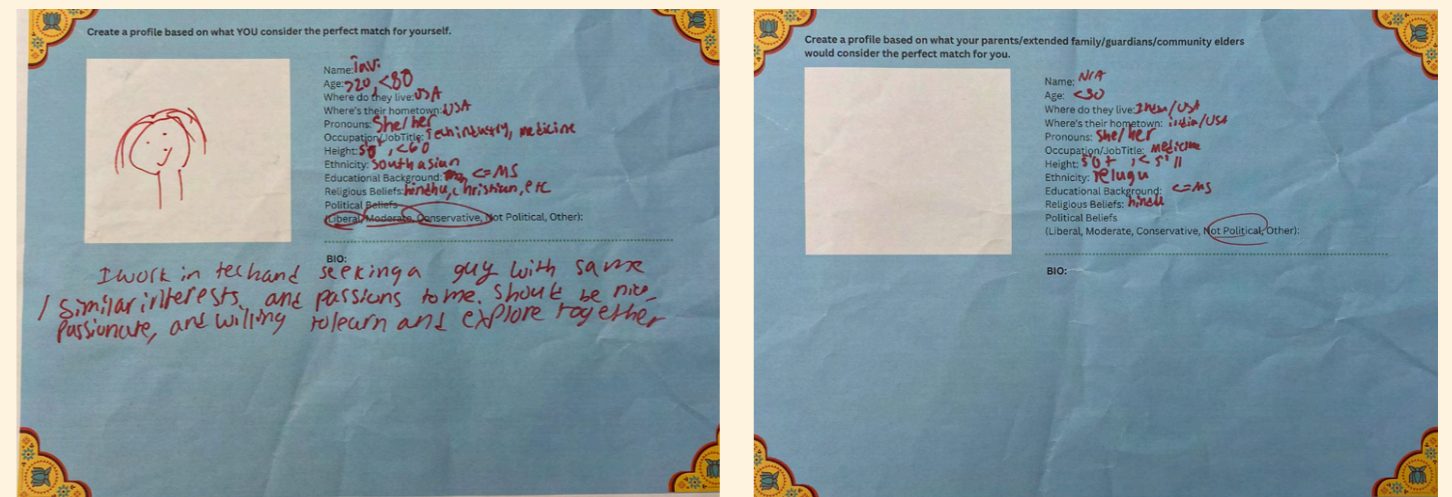
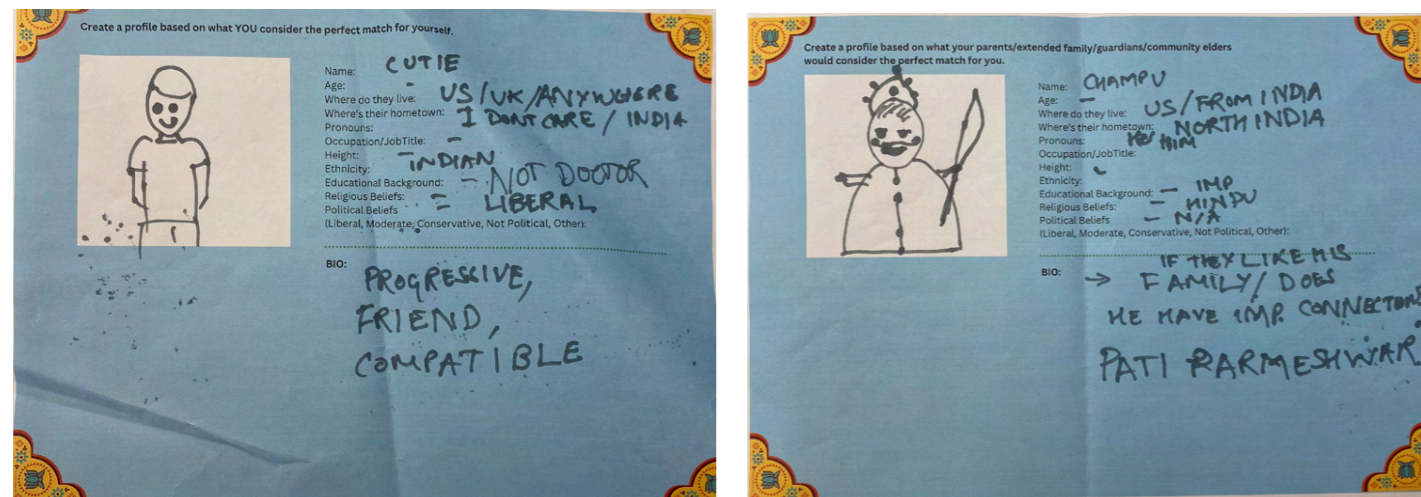
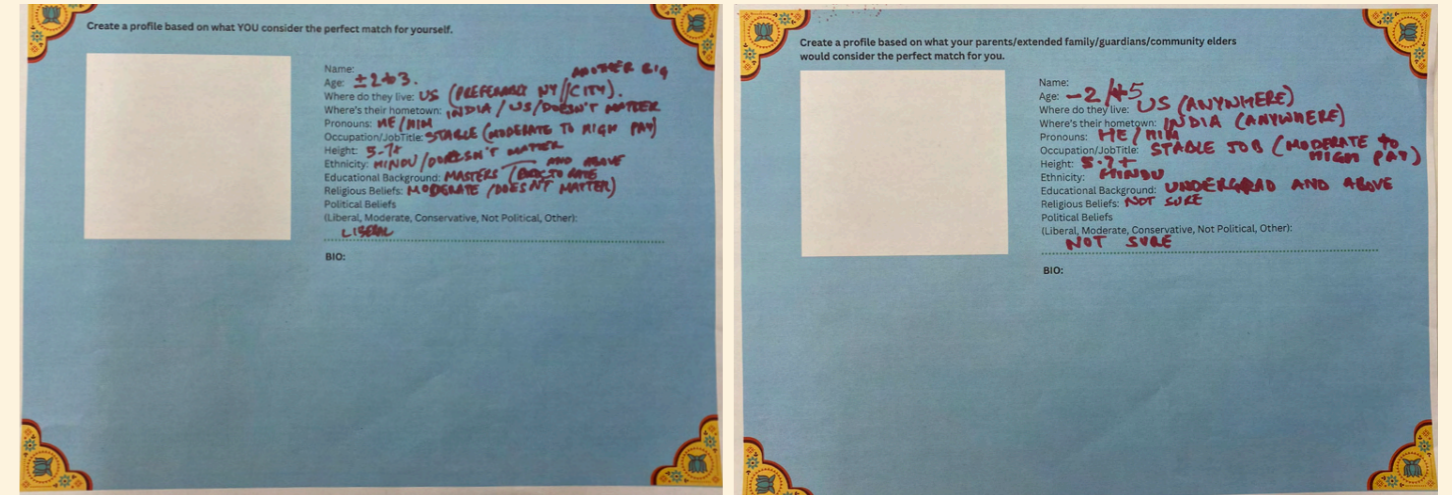
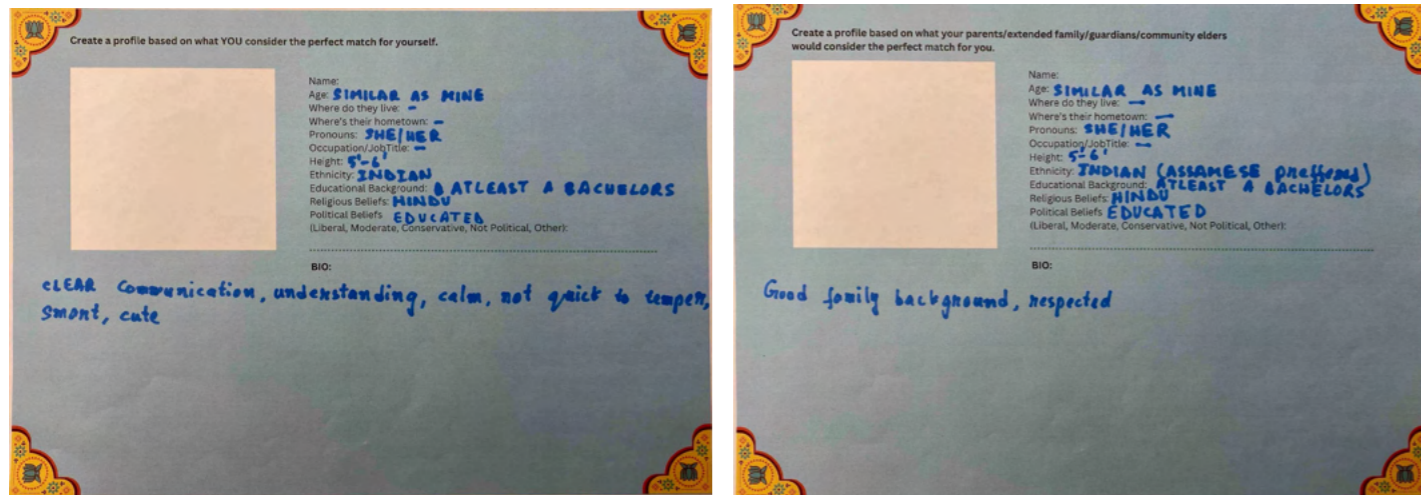


Figure 29: Templates filled out by participants, showing what would they want to see in their partner, v/s what would be the profile of ideal candidate if their parents/ guardians were to select a match for them.

Figure 30: Templates filled out by participants, showing what would they want to see in their partner, v/s what would be the profile of ideal candidate if their parents/ guardians were to select a match for them.

GATHERING 3



Figure 31: Creative Chai Chronicles Poster for Gathering 3

WHEN: 13th April, 2024

WHERE: Oyster Classroom, Pier 57
Community Classrooms at Pier 57 New York,
NY 10011

THEME:

Flavors of Identity: A Deep Dive into South Asian Diasporic Food Cultures

CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND

In the Indian context, the distinction between vegetarian and non-vegetarian food is deeply rooted in the caste system and religious beliefs. This dietary choice acts as a marker of caste identity and moral superiority. These beliefs extend into social and religious practices, influencing everything from daily meals to matrimonial choices, and reflect broader societal norms that govern personal behavior and social status. Briefly mentioning:

- Caste System: Upper castes, especially Brahmins, advocate for vegetarianism to maintain ritual purity, using it as a marker of caste identity and moral superiority.

- Spiritual Associations: Vegetarian food is considered *sattvic*, promoting purity and peace, while non-vegetarian food is viewed as *tamasic*, linked to negativity and chaos.
- Religious Practices: Many Hindus observe specific days where non-vegetarian food is avoided to adhere to spiritual purity.
- Social Implications: Dietary habits influence social dynamics, including marriage alliances and social mobility, reflecting and reinforcing caste distinctions.
- Changing Norms: Modern influences and globalization are gradually altering these traditional dietary practices, particularly among urban and younger populations.

These dietary distinctions are not just personal choices but are embedded in a broader social and religious framework that shapes individual and collective identities.

PARTICIPANTS

5 Participants

Age range: 20- 75 years.

Mostly Indian Origin South Asians, and one participant with Pakistani origin.

ACTIVITIES:

We divided the 2 hours 30 minutes session into 3 main parts:

- Introductions, Settling in
- Community Agreements and Introducing the Purpose of the Gathering
- Reflection Activity: We asked participants to recall and remember what their childhood kitchen looked like. What was the layout like? How were things arranged? Who decides? And asked them to draw the room as they remember it. Other prompts included: Adding the people they associate with the kitchen What do they recall them doing? What sounds, smells and tastes do they recall coming from the kitchen? What are the main grocery items and appliances in your childhood kitchen? What about feelings and textures, heat and cold? Write and/or draw them. We asked participants to then do the same exercise for their current kitchen and compare

- Shareout and Open Discussion: We asked the following questions/ prompts during shareout: Gender norms- Now I cook before I did not (for guys or maybe even women), only moms/ maids in the kitchen. Maybe rituals around menstruation. Narratives.
- The layout of the kitchen. If people say there was a strict segregation of utensils. Other markers of segregation. The presence of helpers and lack of help now in the kitchen. This could help us open up into caste perhaps

WHAT WORKED?

Using nostalgia and happy memories as a bait to invite community into discussions around broader societal themes



Figure 32: Creative Chai Chronicles Poster for Gathering 3, Pier 57, Chelsea

ARTIFACTS FROM GATHERING 3



Figure 34: The Prompts

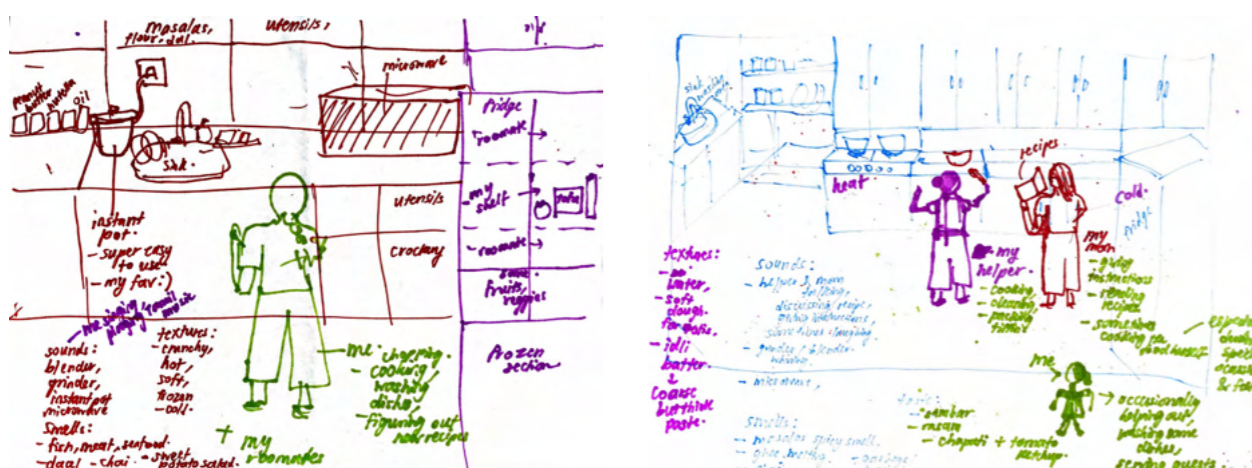


Figure 33: Participant's creative expression, based on the prompts.



Figure 35: Group photos from the session

GATHERING 4



Figure 36: Creative Chai Chronicles Poster for Gathering 4

WHEN: 20th April, 2024

WHERE: Brooklyn Public Library - Washington Irving Branch, Washington Irving Auditorium Woodbine Street Brooklyn, NY 11237

THEME:

Flavors of Identity: A Deep Dive into South Asian Diasporic Food Cultures

CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND

While we are connected by our experience of being racial minorities in the US, we are divided by caste within our South Asian communities - leading to a complicated sense of identity and a shared history of division no matter what position one occupies. While we may have made some progress in terms of racial equity, caste is often unaddressed as it is considered taboo to talk about.

OBJECTIVE

Since Dalit History is a shared history for all South Asians and beyond. We wanted to host this gathering to create a space for reflection, discussion, and to harness collective wisdom to tap into the knowledge. The aim is to start productive, hopeful conversations around acknowledging the caste system, and its contemporary manifestations and ways to dismantle it.

PARTICIPANTS

5 Participants
3 Historically caste privileged, 2 Historically caste oppressed.
Age range: 20- 29 years.
Mostly Indian Origin South Asians

FRAMING THE EVENT:

To invite participants and promote the event, we framed the gathering as an exploration of the following themes: In honor of Dalit History Month in April, we invite you on a reflective journey to celebrate the rich legacy of resistance against the caste system, a system that is a shared social reality for us South Asians regardless of our caste backgrounds. While we are connected by our experience of being racial minorities in the US, we are divided by caste within our South Asian communities - leading to a complicated sense of identity and a shared history of division no matter what position one occupies. While we may have made some progress in terms of racial equity, caste is often unaddressed as it is considered taboo to talk about.

With empathy as our compass and a commitment to curiosity without judgment, we hope to create an open space for listening and sharing stories to understand why we as South Asians struggle to talk about caste and tap into our collective wisdom to understand what we can do to make these necessary conversations a reality. We'll be doing a combination of creative reflective practices such as writing, making crafts and light movement based activities as part of this gathering.

Let's start a conversation together and keep it growing beyond Dalit History Month.

ACTIVITIES:

We divided the 2 hours 30 minutes session into 5 main parts:

- Introductions, Settling in
- Community Agreements and Introducing the Purpose of the Gathering
- Reflection Activity: If caste and race were a texture, a taste, a sound, what would it be like?
- Shareout and Open Discussion: We asked the following questions/ prompts during shareout: When you think about a typical day in your life, when does race and caste have the most impact on you? What is happening at that moment? Where are you? Who are you with? What are you doing? It might be a small subtle thing you observe or something more visible, it could be a microaggression, maybe a backhanded compliment, a stereotype, an everyday object, a space
- Collective Visioning and Open Discussion: The participants were given a big chart paper, and were asked: Imagine a South Asian diaspora where caste has been dismantled. Draw your vision for a conversation on caste that will help to get us there. Also, write any values, mindsets and tools that you think will be necessary. Values, mindsets, strategies, tools that are important to get there

WHAT WORKED?

Creating a brave, safe space, where people can have uncomfortable discussions. Abstract prompts, to understand people's relationship with caste. Giving participants the freedom to choose their own mediums of expression. Strictly sticking to community agreements.

ARTIFACTS FROM GATHERING 4

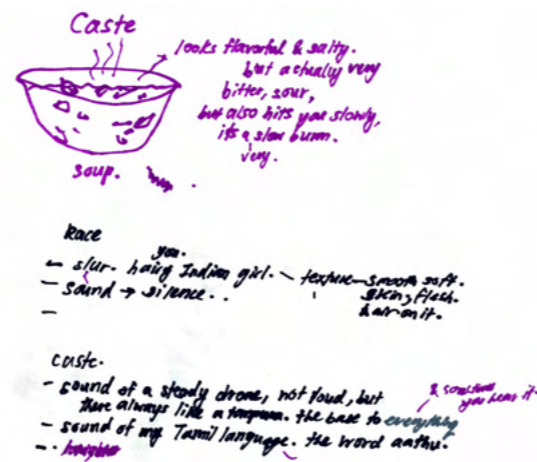
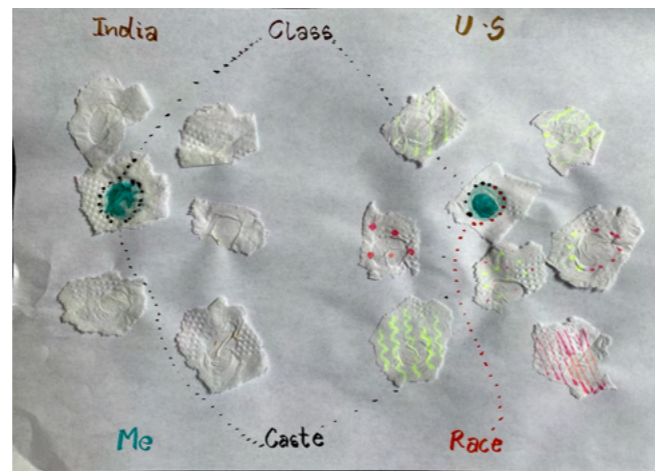
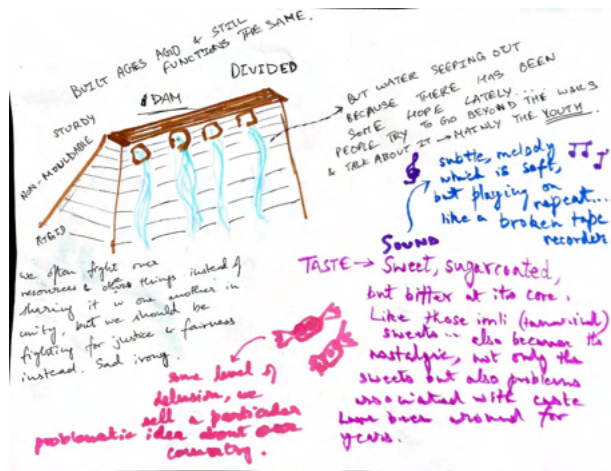


Figure 37: Participant's creative expressions



Figure 38: Community Agreements

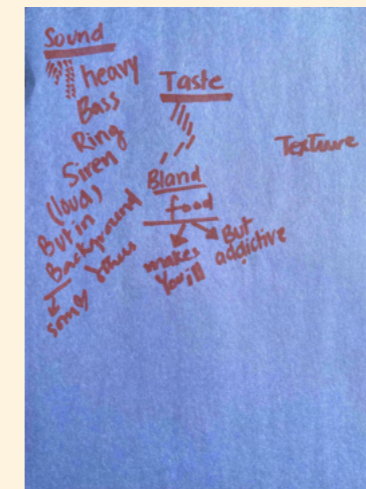


Figure 39: Participant's creative expressions

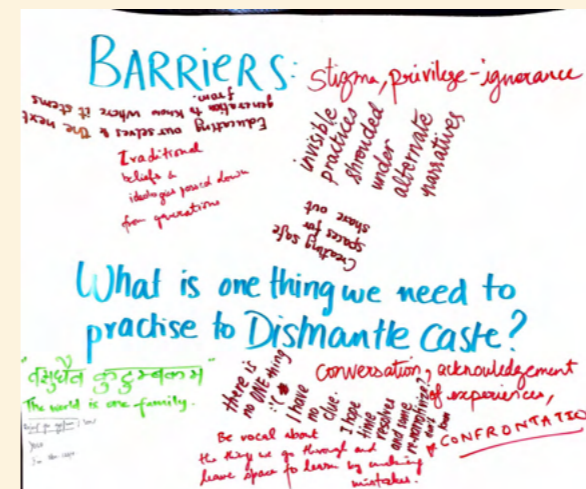


Figure 40: Collective envisioning

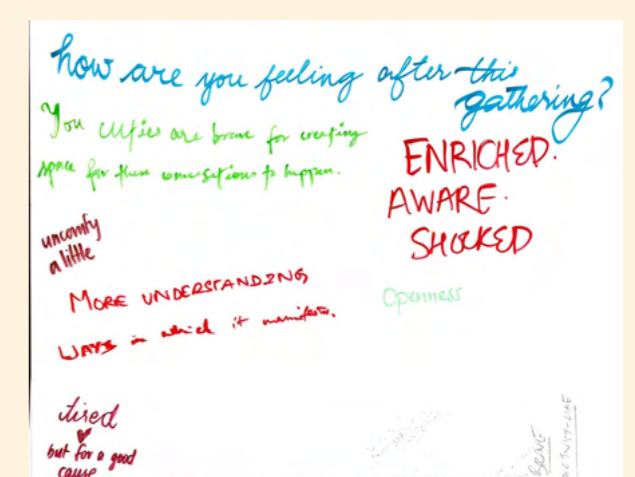


Figure 41: Feedback collected after the gathering

LEARNINGS

- Most of the historically caste privileged people were completely unaware of the day to day struggles of historically caste oppressed people
- Historically caste oppressed people have developed keen understanding of the caste system, and there are highly aware about its manifestations and implications.
- It is a myth that caste based segregation is only a thing in rural India, whereas it is also present in metropolitan cities, and is not a thing of the past.
- There is little to almost no awareness of how objects of daily use are historically been designed with regards to caste based segregation (eg. filter coffee glasses in India)
- Sometimes people are unaware of their boundaries, and even after setting exit strategies in the workshop, they will cross their own boundaries. Professional therapy is a must.

FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

- The participants expressed their gratitude for the space. And mentioned how important a gap this is addressing- a reflection space for South Asians, a space where they can learn and unlearn with each other.
- The activities need to be more trauma informed, direct reflection prompts are not the best.
- A grounding activity to reflect, and to work on while discussions is helpful.
- Movement makes people loosen up, and is a good group building exercise.
- There needs to be a professional therapist in the gatherings for the participants.
- Participants mentioned their key takeaways as:
 - How to listen with empathy.
 - Approaching conversations with empathy
 - Curiosity rather than judgement



Figure 42
Source: Pinterest

NARRATIVE

The Theory of Change aimed at addressing caste-based discrimination within the BIPOC communities of the Indian diaspora in the USA employs a systematic approach by setting preconditions that catalyze specific outcomes, leading towards the overarching goal of reducing discrimination.

Starting with the preconditions, access to tools and methodologies designed to increase tolerance is pivotal. When this is achieved, it enables meaningful dialogues and learning about intra-caste tolerance, which helps in dismantling pre-existing biases and fosters a more inclusive environment. Alongside this, ensuring shared power and influence allows historically marginalized communities to participate in decision-making processes, which empowers them and ensures their voices are heard.

The introduction of tools to retrain, reorient, and rebuild systems free from caste-based intergenerational trauma addresses the roots of discrimination and prevents its perpetuation. Additionally, access to shared spaces for collective dialogue and healing activities creates environments where diverse backgrounds converge, promoting mutual understanding and community healing.

These preconditions lead to several critical outcomes. For instance, the adoption of healing rituals in cultural practices promotes mental and emotional well-being. This progression is complemented by an increase in social support systems, which are crucial for individuals recovering from the impacts of discrimination.

Furthermore, as these healing practices become integrated into community activities, awareness of somatic and holistic approaches to health increases, enhancing community well-being overall. The destigmatization of therapy and increased access to therapeutic services follow as community dialogues and educational efforts reduce mental health stigma. Open discussions in safe spaces also help acknowledge the trauma associated with caste discrimination, facilitating the development of a language to articulate these experiences, which is essential for healing and advocacy.

The interventions designed to drive these changes include building communities with embedded and somatic healing practices, creating spaces for gatherings to share diverse experiences with caste, and developing tailored healing practices for addressing caste-based trauma. Additionally, facilitated self-reflection activities enable individuals to examine their experiences and biases, fostering personal growth and community solidarity.

Each of these steps, from increasing awareness and tolerance to empowering communities and improving economic conditions, supports the subsequent one, ensuring that interventions are effective and progress is sustainable. This structured approach ultimately pushes towards the goal of reducing caste-based discrimination, ensuring that every step logically contributes to the next in a cohesive and impactful manner.

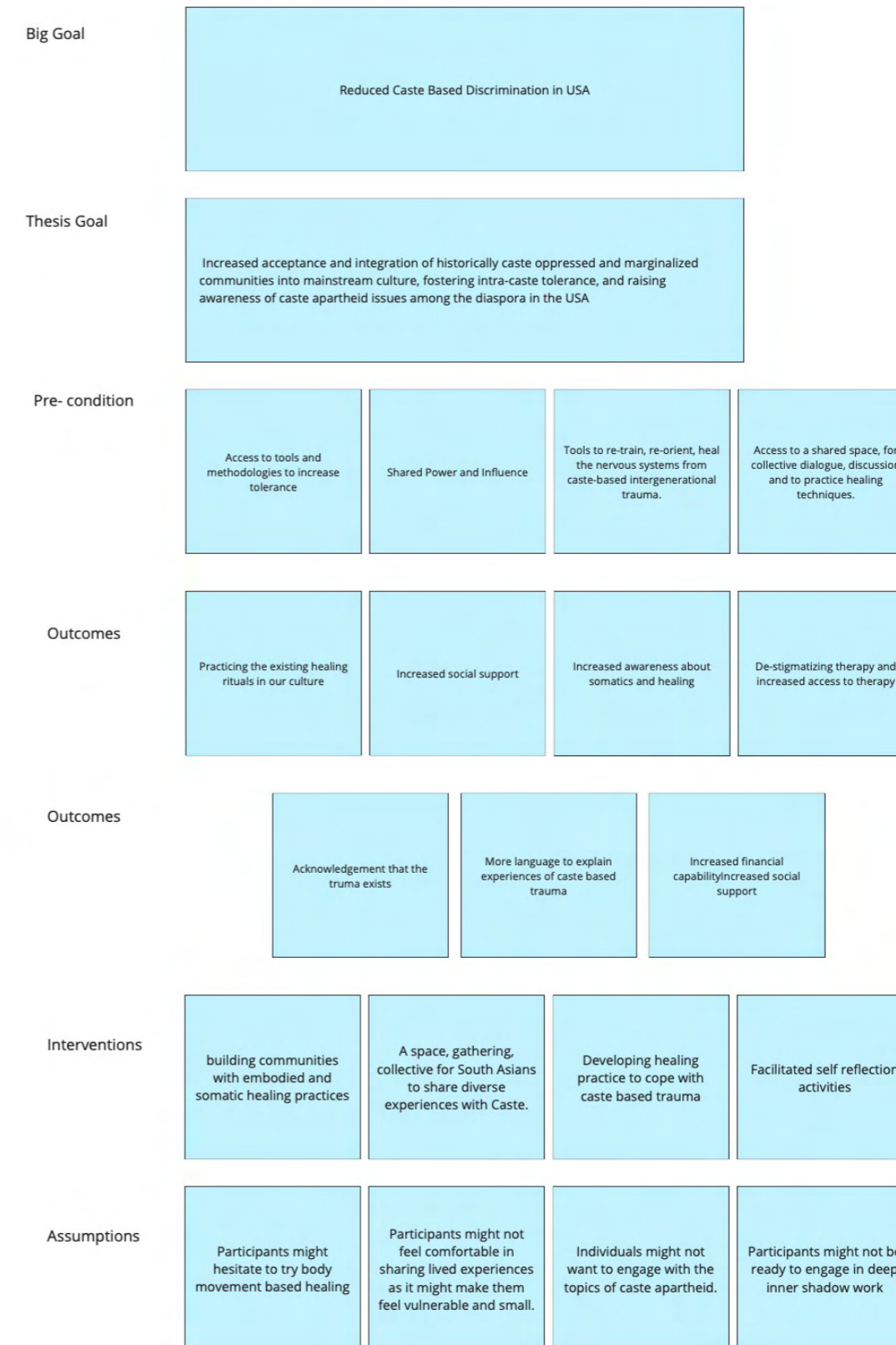


Figure 43: Theory of Change

Theory of Change



Figure 44: Artwork by Ishaan Gupta
Image Source: Pinterest

The journey begins

THIS IS THE BEGINNING

Throughout this series of gatherings, we were wondering what could be other ways of communication: I leaned on our community and was directed towards traditional folk music and dance forms. South Asia has a rich history of narration-based folk art forms, that have been used to share different stories, for a long time. We collectively imagined that could be the next step, sharing community stories through different folk art forms of singing and dancing, and these art forms are easy to understand and accessible to the community.

When I first started interacting with the community, it was as a dance teacher. I taught Bhangra, a folk dance from Punjab, India. It is usually done by men, but I thought why can't women do this, I learned it and started teaching it to other girls in the community. During the last gathering, I realized I could go back to the community, as a folk dance teacher, and explore ways of using body movement to narrate caste-based experiences. It would be a complete circle.

Healing through body movement-based practices, not somatic therapy, but bhangra, gidda, haryanavi raas, yoga, practices, and art forms that are existent in the South Asian Culture already. As I pitched that idea to the community, someone said dance for them is joy, and their existence in joy is resistance.

For generations, historically oppressed and marginalized communities have existed in fear, which has been installed through inhumane practices of social segregation, and untouchability, enforcing the idea that certain humans are less valuable than others based on caste and then maintained by strict rituals and traditions. I found accepting and finding

joy in my existence, is a revolution, it is a rebellious act, an act of resistance. This made me feel stronger and pushed me to live a more fulfilling life. Now since my positionality, and my experience witnessing caste, and gender-based oppression are out in the world, through my chosen narrative, I can work with my community or more marginalized communities to facilitate the process of finding joy in themselves, and their work, even in their lows and sadness.

I always knew that creating art, dancing, moving, acting, and writing could be a form of resistance. But I never did once I considered that- resting, eating well, or JUST existing- with joy- can be an act of resistance.

But yet again I can't stop making comparisons of day-to-day life with the life in Begumpura. And yet I still find myself, a step forward, towards it, through this thesis. The harsh realities of life- the inequalities in class, caste, and gender, fuel me to work harder toward a just world, and the concept of Begumpura keeps me on track. I hope everyone can find joy in their being and move a step towards their own Begumpura.

I would like to share this quote: "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unloved, but if faced with courage need not be lived again" said by Maya Angelou.

But before I knew about Maya Angelou, I had my idols, and role models at home- My nani, nana, and mummy. These were my role models before I knew about Maya Angelou or Dr. B R Ambedkar, I would like to dedicate my work, my thesis, and this presentation to my nani. In her remembrance, I am dedicating this work to her. I am grateful for my family to support me throughout and beyond this journey.



Figure 45: Me- Bhavya clicked by Dhanashree, Brooklyn Bridge, July 2023



Figure 46: Me and Lona, clicked by Brielle, Quiet Room, SVA DSI, April 2024

GRATITUDE NOTE

As I conclude this thesis, I am filled with immense gratitude for the support and encouragement I received from so many wonderful individuals.

To Andrew, thank you for highlighting the importance of curiosity and the power of asking questions. Your insights and unwavering support in understanding the community's needs were invaluable.

To Vandhana, my co-designer, co-facilitator, and dear friend, thank you for your openness, reliability, and constant collaboration. Working alongside you made this journey not only productive but also enjoyable.

To my thesis advisor, Sahar, the thesis advisor's team—Kara, Lona, and Mari—and the DSI chair—Miya—words cannot fully express my gratitude for your guidance. Your wisdom, patience, and belief in my abilities helped me navigate the challenging moments and stay focused on my goals.

To my DSI family and friends, your unwavering support and encouragement have been the fuel that kept me going. Your faith in me, understanding during stressful times, and joy in my successes have meant everything.

To my family, your unwavering love has been my rock throughout this journey. Despite the distance, your care, encouragement, and celebrations of my victories have given me strength and inspiration. You've shown me that every accomplishment is worth celebrating and that no challenge is too big.

Thank you all for empowering me with your love and support. I am honored to have had you by my side throughout this journey.



Figure 47: Moving Rasa Community SVA DSI, June 2023



Figure 48: Vandhana and Me, Pier 57, April 2024



Figure 49: SVA DSI Class of 2024 with Marc and Hanna, SVA DSI, September 2022

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