

# When workplace policies collide with the realities of DEI

## And how Google sacrifices women to keep order

*My career at Google has come to an end because of this company's willful ignorance of caste discrimination, the double standards of its DEI programming, the weaponization of confidentiality to avoid accountability, and a normalized practice of retaliation against those who speak out.*

If we never had a chance to meet in the halls of Google during my 11 years at the company, allow me to introduce myself. My name is [Tanuja Gupta](#). I was born and raised in Texas after my parents immigrated to the United States in the 1980s from India. By birth, I am half Hindu, half Jain, though I most closely identify as a Jain. After high school, I attended college at New York University where I graduated in three years and made the Dean's List every semester. I worked full time through my last two years of college, and started my career in tech at the age of 20. I have since worked in technology for another 20 years as an engineering program manager. During my cumulative 11 years at Google, I have been promoted 3 times. When I was an individual contributor (ie not a people manager), I co-organized the [Google Walkout](#) to protest how sexual harassment and discrimination were handled at Google, going on to successfully advocate for [ending forced arbitration](#) within our company. Outside of Google, I have continued to advocate for both the [Forced Arbitration Injustice Repeal Act](#) and the [recently passed HR 4445](#) to end forced arbitration for sexual misconduct in the workplace.

In April 2019, after Google ended its policy of forcing arbitration, I became a people manager for our Google News team. In 2020, I received that third promotion to "Level 7" and to date, have built a team of 17 reports. During my last performance review, which ended May 2nd, I received a rating of 'Strongly Exceeds Expectations.' I sit 4 degrees of separation from our CEO (me → Sr. Director → VP → SVP → CEO). Aside from being entrusted to lead several key initiatives for our 700+ cross-functional News team, I also founded a diversity, equity and inclusion model that became the blueprint for other teams at Google. After two years of building this program, I was co-awarded Google's [Search Superlative Award](#) in 2021 for the impact of my work and this DEI model.

**I'm sharing all of this because everything you read below will come down to credibility - mine, the banned speaker's, Google's and my fellow Googlers'. It's also a reminder that no amount of work success, number of successfully executed projects, or accrued credibility makes you any less disposable if you challenge the structures of power.**

One element of this DEI program model I mentioned is to run a speaker series, where experts from different organizations come speak to Googlers to educate them on matters of equity in different industries and countries. Since April is Dalit History Month, we wanted to shed light on caste discrimination. For those who are not familiar with this topic, the caste system is a millennia-old system of exclusion originating in South Asia. It impacts over 1.9B South Asians globally today, including 5.4M South Asians here in America. Dalits (the most oppressed in the Caste system) have been historically subjected to violence and denied access to education, healthcare, land ownership, and other social capital. Dalits are considered 'untouchable'

because they are considered 'polluted'. And today, even though this sort of discrimination runs [afoul of federal and local laws](#), Dalits, including those who have migrated to other countries like the United States, continue to suffer discrimination in private and public spaces—including [tech workspaces](#), specifically [Google](#).

In September 2021, two Google employees approached me confidentially about the caste discrimination they had witnessed at the company. They shared the [struggles](#) they faced simply having a talk at Google about caste discrimination. I agreed to host this talk as part of our News DEI program and connected to them my direct report to execute. The News DEI Speaker Series was all set to have a talk about caste equity on April 18th with Thenmozhi Soundararajan, the co-founder of Dalit History Month and Equality Labs. Thenmozhi Soundararajan is a leading expert in caste equity and a Dalit herself. Her work led to the first Congressional hearing on caste discrimination in America, and her organization Equality Labs has been essential to the [Cisco caste discrimination lawsuit](#). Caste discrimination follows South Asians wherever they go. So considering how matters of caste equity are covered in the news ([or not](#)) AND given the huge South Asian population in tech, my News team found this topic relevant and timely for our speaker series.

However, starting two days prior to the talk, a series of actions, reactions (and inaction) started, leading to what I believe are retaliatory measures towards me and discrimination towards South Asian caste-oppressed employees:

- **Wed, Apr 13 - Fri, Apr 15**
  - A handful of Google employees send emails to myself and/or members of Google product & HR leadership at different levels with concerns, accusations and disinformation about the talk and speaker.
  - Someone doxxes my direct report by posting her email about the talk on Twitter.
  - I meet with my VP and Chief Diversity Officer, who collectively decide to postpone the talk and perform due diligence on the speaker. They also ask me to debunk the misinformation in the emails from a handful of Googlers.
  - They promise to hold the talk once the due diligence is complete.
- **Mon, Apr 18**
  - Meanwhile, I host a talk with Thenmozhi off-corp so it's open to the public - [watch here on YouTube](#).
  - I and several other Googlers donate to the speaker's organization, [Equality Labs](#), via our internal gift match platform since it is an approved organization ([click here](#)).
- **Two weeks pass with canceled HR meetings and no response on the information I have provided on the speaker.**
- **Thu, Apr 28**
  - I post [this email](#) describing what's happened to groups to reach ~8K Googlers, launch an internal site at [go/caste-equity](#) and invite Googlers to sign a petition if they believe the talk should be reinstated.
  - I host another talk with Thenmozhi off-corp, with a much bigger audience this time - [watch here on YouTube](#).
  - HR asks my manager to submit a Talks@Google form as another form of vetting the speaker - to date, I have never heard back on the results.

- Employee Relations (HR) also reaches out to me, which I *assume* is to help with my direct report's doxxing case.
- **Fri, Apr 29**
  - 400+ Googlers [sign the petition](#), and multiple tech companies and activists send us endorsement letters of Thenmozhi Soundarajan (which are forwarded to our Chief Diversity officer and CEO). I [post this email](#).
  - I meet with Employee Relations, where I realize I am now under investigation because Google employee(s) escalated concerns about *me*.
  - Moderators remove my emails from the [industryinfo@](#) and [pmtpm-discuss@](#) forums.
  - At this point, I'm tracking three separate investigations with different parties (i) Security, to investigate who doxxed my direct report, (ii) ERG PeopleOps, to investigate the proposed speaker's credentials and vet the complaints of the Googlers and (iii) Risk Compliance, to investigate me based on concerns by people I do not know.
- **Two weeks pass, Dalit History Month ends and I hear nothing on the HR investigation nor the Talks@google submission.** Meanwhile, my email spawns new threads that (a) deny caste discrimination ([ex1](#), [ex2](#)); (b) label caste-oppressed people as less educated ([ex](#)); (c) contain Hindu-phobic allegations ([ex](#)); (d) make claims of caste equity reverse discrimination ([ex](#)); and (e) ask for my petition to be a survey, as if we should only hear about this topic from this speaker if the dominant majority group agreed ([ex](#)). At some point, the Moma search for [Equality Labs] also has a [top suggested result](#) with [content](#) from a known disinformation site. Another 200+ Googlers sign the petition to reinstate the talk with Thenmozhi.
- **Thu, May 12**
  - HR notifies me that I have violated the People Manager Code of Conduct and that I will receive a written warning letter later in the day. The investigator also confirms that if I was an individual contributor, this investigation would not be happening. They also ask me to take down several parts of the [go/caste-equity](#) site, including any reference to HR actions and specific statements by three Googlers - who will all be contacted separately as well. (One of the Googlers confirmed HR never contacted him.)
  - Separately, the Head of Product Inclusion & Equity [reaches out to me](#) to learn more about caste as it relates to our products.
  - Two hours later, in a meeting with my VP (pronouns: they/them), I find out that the person who is responsible for deciding whether or not we will have a talk on caste equity (and whether or not Soundarajan can be the speaker) has been my VP all along. And that they will conduct a listening session with the Hindu Employee Resource Group to help them make a decision. They also confirm the contents of my [warning letter](#): my performance rating in the next cycle will automatically be lowered, affecting my compensation, and I will be ineligible for promotion for at least the next promotion cycle.
- **Mon, May 16**

- I meet 1:1 with our VP, who says we should have the conversation on caste equity, but with a different speaker. I ask them to meet with the original speaker, Thenmozhi Soundararajan, to at least hear from her directly. My VP agrees. Right after, we meet with my direct report to break this news and make a plan to move forward where the DEI HR team will help us source and vet speakers. [Read the full TRANSCRIPT here, PII redacted.](#)
- I meet 1:1 with my Manager and have a conversation which cinches my letter of dispute, as you see a week later.
- **Tue, May 17**
  - My VP, Thenmozhi and I meet for 40 minutes, where my VP asserts this is not a legal discrimination issue and acknowledges Thenmozhi is being held to a different standard than all other speakers. [Read the full TRANSCRIPT here, PII redacted.](#) (If you read only one transcript, let it be this one.)
- **Thu, May 19**
  - After multiple pings, I recap to my VP, manager and HR that we have sourced multiple alternative speakers, but have been explicitly told not to reach out to them by HR.
  - We also still have no understanding of the vetting process, or what was objectionable about Thenmozhi in the first place.
  - I do not hear back from HR, and still haven't to this day.
  - I confide in a colleague who says to me "they've been waiting for an opportunity to do this to you for years". This triggers my memory and I remember the report on [Project Vivian as reported in VICE](#), where the [end forced arbitration group](#) that I founded is [discussed explicitly](#). And I am the last Walkout organizer at the company. It suddenly occurs to me that the punishment I have received may have nothing to do with this episode, but that Google may have finally just found that opportunity to fire me without firing me.
- **Mon, May 23**
  - 11:15am EST - I dispute the warning letter (read [1,2,3,4](#), PII redacted) - to date, I have received no response with the requested information / clarifications from HR nor my VP.
  - 11:20am EST - I formally request a legal investigation for retaliation and workplace safety (read [1,2,3,4,5](#), PII redacted).
  - 6:00pm EST - I resign from Google. My manager states, "I had a feeling the second I read the letter ... I think about everything I could have done and should have done. I guess I don't see a full version of this story where I could have made you and Google happy."
- **Tue, May 24**
  - My VP reaches out for a chat, asking if I have plans, offering their personal email, willing to make introductions to people in government and tech. When I ask, "would you stay if you had to sign that letter?", they reply "I don't know."
  - They also say that they will separate the DEI talk from the Product Inclusion talk, so it will not go through the HR DEI processes.

- My VP confirms, “I can run my product and engineering business however I like without HR involvement. The problem with this whole thing, sadly, has been the word ‘DEI’ in the speaker series, and then basically that gets into a world in which multiple groups feel like they have purview.”
- Lawyers from Alphabet - not HR from Google - reach out to start the investigation of retaliation. They ask for my lawyer’s contact information.
- **Wed, May 25**
  - My direct report, my manager, my VP and I meet to discuss a status update, my VP resharing what they shared the day prior.
  - My VP confirms that they have ‘laid the groundwork with the Hindu ERG’, and ‘we should be careful about the language we use in the future’.
  - Speakers on caste will be vetted by Central Compliance rather than HR, but the vetting criteria and process is unknown (still haven’t received the objectionable material on the original speaker to date).
  - We hold on reaching out to the nine alternative speakers while our VP confirms a) whether the vetting process will be behind the scenes or involves an interview with the prospective speaker and b) whether Thenmozhi will be sent through this process or not (my VP wants to think about it).
    - During this whole process, Thenmozhi sources these speaker options for us due to her desire to ensure Google still has the caste equity talk. However, the majority of the prospective candidates are not Dalit nor South Asian.
  - [Read the full TRANSCRIPT here, PII redacted.](#)
- **Thu, May 26**
  - Comms go out to the News team about my departure.
  - We also learn that the new vetting process, steps still unknown, will be discussed at Google Leads the Tue, May 31st. ([see here](#)).
- **Tue, May 31**
  - Asian Pacific American Heritage Month is over.
  - I have no update on the new vetting process.
  - I still have not received the specific social media posts that made Thenmozhi unacceptable in the first place.
  - The contract for Thenmozhi has still not been upheld.
  - The person who doxxed my direct report has still not been found.
  - A separate talk about caste by HR is being planned with a non-Dalit, non-South Asian speaker.

The above are the verifiable facts, but I’d like to share some personal conclusions. As I do, remember that Alphabet (Google) is like a nation-state. Our executive leadership changes less frequently than US elected officials, and our market cap value of [\\$1.45 trillion](#) rivals the GDP of countries like [Canada, Australia or South Korea](#). Bear this power in mind when you consider the weight of Google’s choices.

1. **Retaliation is a normalized Google practice to handle internal criticism, and women take the hit.** It is no secret that women are often tasked with matters of diversity, equity and inclusion in corporate America. We are also often the ones who

raise our hands too, perhaps because we're often disproportionately affected by the *lack* of diversity, equity and inclusion. However, it feels increasingly unsafe to work in this space. In this particular case, four women of color (me, my two direct reports, and Thenmozhi Soundarajan), were harassed and/or silenced. Before us, [April Curley](#) was terminated in 2020, after she vocally opposed and called for reform of the double standards Google imposed on Black employees and applicants. [Timnit Gebru](#) was terminated in December 2020 after she criticized the company's approach to minority hiring and published a research paper pointing out the bias flaws in a new AI system for learning languages. [Margaret Mitchell](#), Gebru's colleague, was removed for publicly denouncing Gebru's removal and continuing to investigate the circumstances of her dismissal. Many of [my fellow Walkout organizers](#) have been dismissed or resigned from the company for their protests of Google's sexual harassment policies. We've all been punished for our internal criticism because we're "disruptive" to the workplace. But practicing equity *is* fundamentally disruptive because we're trying to correct for structural imbalances rooted in decades - centuries - of injustice. And in particular, if managers are the ones with the power to enact significant DEI-related changes, but are bound by a policy that punishes disruption, how much does Google really want its DEI efforts to succeed?

**2. The machine of Google HR needs to be disassembled and completely rebuilt.**

- a. First, Google policies are written so broadly that they can cover anything, so you have to question this selective enforcement.
- b. Next, since you're told to keep everything 'as confidential as possible', you can't speak out for fear of further penalties. Which means you can't verify if what you're being told is true or not. Google weaponizes confidentiality to avoid accountability.
- c. The very structure of HR is a shell game. All of these teams use different terms that obscure the fact they are all ultimately in HR. If you're a Googler who is going through an investigation for the first time, you may not realize that Employee Relations and People Ops are HR. Or that the other teams you're working with (ex: GSOC for doxxing investigations) are *NOT* in HR. And they're all pointing to one another - or your management - for who has the final say on what.
- d. Now consider the fact that official DEI practitioners are being lumped into HR. Our Chief Diversity Officer, ERG Advisors and Diversity Business Partners ... They all report to HR, and are constrained by the whims of HR. Why would anyone be a DEI practitioner if they aren't ensured safety to conduct their job duties or gaslighted by the team that's supposed to ensure safety for all Googlers? DEI without those protections is performative, and increases risk for everyone involved. Which is why my VP is working *around* HR to get a caste equity talk on the books.

**3. Google is woefully and willfully ill-equipped to deal with matters of caste**

**discrimination**, and that has led to the events and harm you've read about today. Of all the organizing I have done at this company, I think many are surprised that fighting for caste equity was the lightning rod issue that took me down. But I have an Indian [CEO](#)

and [SVP](#) who both know exactly what's going on and tacitly approve of everything that's happened. I know this because multiple VPs and Directors confirmed that in Sundar's Leads meeting, they discussed the need for a new universal vetting process of speakers to ensure this doesn't happen again. So my hope is that Googlers start to understand the magnitude of this issue, and the threat that their greater understanding poses to the South Asians in power.

### So what can you do?

1. **Learn everything you can about caste discrimination** at [go/caste-equity-learn](#). To get started: [watch this talk](#), [listen to this interview](#) and [read this article](#).
2. **Resist checking in with South Asian colleagues.** Google has unwittingly just told every caste-oppressed Googler to go back in the closet, affecting their psychological safety, jeopardizing their future at the company and potentially their immigration status. Don't put the burden of your education on the excluded.
3. **Demand that Google [specify caste as a protected class](#) in all locations** ([not just India](#)) and that all managers are trained on what this means for the workforce. We recognize caste in our product policies ([YouTube](#), [Google](#)), so let's make sure this is recognized in our people policies as well.

To the News team and all the people who reached out in the past week, it *broke my heart* to not be able to respond to your messages. I hope you understand now. I printed out each message (both public and private) and I will carry so many of you in my heart forever. No team is perfect, but our News team community was the real deal - banding together when it really mattered. I also hope you'll remember that the retaliation I've faced is not a result of our News leadership, but of my management chain, HR and Google executive leadership. Direct questions accordingly.

To my talented, compassionate, insightful and essential News T/PgM team colleagues - I'm so sorry so many of you got caught in the cross-fire. I am rooting for each of you always.

Last, I know I am privileged to be able to write this letter because I'm leaving with the assurance of a future. **The real victims are a) Thenmozhi Soundararajan, whose voice was stifled and b) the people who experience caste discrimination every day, but cannot speak out for fear of losing their immigration visas or being the target of hate crimes ... or both.** The fight for all of them continues whether I'm here or not - I hope you'll join me.

-- Tanuja