

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Dalit Civil rights artist, organizer, technologist

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Background Information

Born: N/A

Thenmozhi Soundararajan is a first-generation Indian American raised in Los Angeles, California. Her parents fled Tamil Nadu, India, in 1975 because of caste oppression.ⁱ As a child, Thenmozhi Soundararajan learned that her family were members of the lowest-ranked caste in Hinduism, the Dalits.ⁱⁱ The Caste system is a structure in India that was abolished in 1950, but still persisted. It started as a job system but later became a social class system that depends on one’s heritage.ⁱⁱⁱ Thenmozhi’s low caste system ranking meant that her family was treated unfairly. Dalits have some

of the highest rates of discrimination and violence of all Asian American communities.

Resistance

As a college student at the University of California, Berkeley, Thenmozhi revealed her caste. As a result, she endured discrimination from many Indian professors on campus.^{iv} Since then, Soundararajan has made it her mission to end caste oppression. In 2015, Soundararajan co-founded Equality Labs, a Dalit civil rights organization. Equality Labs conducted and produced the first survey on caste discrimination in America.^v The research found that Dalits living in America still face mistreatment because of their caste. Throughout American educational institutions and industries, Dalits experience caste-based assault. Thenmozhi supported Representative Pramila Jayapal during a congressional meeting on caste discrimination in the United States in Washington D.C., examining caste bias in the workplace.^{vi} She cofounded Dalit History Month to further educate communities on caste systems throughout the South Asian diaspora. The awareness month also highlights contributions made by Dalits in history. Thenmozhi co-founded Third World Majority, an international media training collective that supports people from disenfranchised groups to share their stories in *their* way.^{vii} She has previously presided over the Ambedkarites Association of North America. This anti-caste organization raises international awareness of the South Asian system of segregation.^{viii}

Achievements

The Trauma of Caste, exposes caste oppression in the South Asian subcontinent and the United States.^{ix} She was inducted as a member of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Art

as Activist fellow.^x The Source Magazine recognized Thenmozhi as One of the Top Ten Political Forces in Hip Hop.^{xi}

Essential Questions

1. How did the caste system affect Thenmozhi's family?

2. How did Thenmozhi use her lifelong experiences with the caste system and discrimination in America to inspire change?
 - a. How did she resist unfair treatment?

3. Why did Thenmozhi create organizations and events such as Third World majority and Dalit History Month?
 - a. What type of organization or event could you create that educates other communities about marginalized groups in your school or neighborhood?

4. ***"A lot of times when people talk about the caste system, they talk about it being one of the oldest systems of repression in the world, but I also like to talk about the fact that that means Dalit movements are one of the oldest resistance movements in the world."***
 - a. What does this quote mean to you?
 - b. How can learning about resistance from previous generations of people inspire new generations to resist as well?

ⁱ https://www.yahoo.com/now/dalit-activist-wants-heal-caste-160900378.html?guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAKghih1efEx4mpuLPSO2G2UfB00mnNeXcYTDbNOI17i-EWalfEWGOn666bOv4bhP1sR428QanGa4dWkl1CxAVgGpLrMtk-V6rw5weXmp2gJeY7AThQzgvKdxm0grI3triSEUP_W2hx-C_WTWmUzSmgsW8kpnz7zjf_PSNm-J1Qnp

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- ii <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a42257504/dalit-activism/>
 - iii <https://kids.kiddle.co/Caste>
 - iv <https://www.shethepeople.tv/news/who-is-thenmozhi-sundararajan/>
 - v <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/06/02/google-caste-equality-labs-tanuja-gupta/>
 - vi <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/06/02/google-caste-equality-labs-tanuja-gupta/>
 - vii <https://www.casteinhighered.com/thenmozhi-sundararajan>
 - viii <https://www.shethepeople.tv/news/who-is-thenmozhi-sundararajan/>
 - ix <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a42257504/dalit-activism/>
 - x <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/12/thenmozhi-sundararajan-dalit-women-art-and-activism>
 - xi <https://scienceandfilm.org/people/307/thenmozhi-sundararajan>