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Dear Members of the Seattle City Council:

I am writing in support of Councilmember Sawant's Draft Ordinance to Ban Caste Discrimination in the City of Seattle. The decision to expand the parameters of your anti-discrimination policies to explicitly include caste would be far-reaching and would attest to your commitment to fostering a truly safe, supportive and inclusive city.

I offer my thoughts as a South Asian American and specialist on caste. As with race, it is important to think of caste as a source of inherited privileges and disadvantages. This is evident in the caste backgrounds of South Asian Americans. The inheritances of caste, most importantly the inter-generational access to higher education, have largely determined who has the means to come to the U.S. and succeed economically and professionally. In effect, caste operates as a filter: first, of which groups have access to education, second, of who can succeed in elite higher education, and third, of who can use elite higher education as a stepping stone to economic and professional success in the U.S. As a result, the composition of the South Asian American community is skewed towards privileged castes with oppressed castes existing as a minority within this minority.

The pervasiveness of casteism in South Asia makes its entry into American society and workplace not in the least bit surprising. Even if there is a general ignorance of caste in the U.S., South Asian social and professional networks guarantee that privilege and disadvantage continue to be reproduced here. The Cisco case and the testimonies gathered by the Ambedkar King Study Circle and Equality Labs show that the same forms of discrimination found in India – from the practice of untouchability to social exclusion and workplace discrimination – continue to thrive in the U.S. The number of Dalits testifying anonymously about their experiences attests to the fact that the stigma of caste and fear of exposure has followed them to the U.S.

Seattle is a city in which South Asians are the fastest growing ethnic group. Making caste a protected category is thus an urgent need for several reasons. One, it will compel institutions to prevent caste-based discrimination. Two, it will enable oppressed caste individuals to seek redress for experiences of discrimination. And three, it will encourage U.S. institutions to expand the scope of diversity and inclusion by consciously recruiting underrepresented oppressed castes.

The importance of caste protections has already been recognized by a number of institutions including, Brandeis University, the California State University system, the Alphabet Workers Union, the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, and the NAACP. Seattle would make history by becoming the first American city to do so.

Unfortunately, as with all advances in civil rights, this one too is being met with opposition by constituencies who are determined to see it overturned. Their arguments are spurious. I urge you to stand firm alongside the large group of South Asian Americans and allies who stand with you. As a South Asian American and specialist on caste, I wanted to offer some critical analysis of the opposing arguments.

Argument 1: Extending protections on the basis of caste is unnecessary because such protections are already covered by existing anti-discrimination policy.

This argument does not acknowledge that oppressed castes are a minority within a minority. They are doubly disadvantaged by virtue of being both racially marked and caste marked. Recognizing caste as a source of discrimination is the recognition of this double disadvantage. It acknowledges that there are stark differences of caste power and status within the South Asian American community that carry over from a long history of inequality in South Asia.

Argument 2: Such protections are anti-Hindu.

Caste is a structure of inequality that is not limited to Hinduism. It is present within every South Asian religion. Moreover, many oppressed caste individuals are themselves Hindus. Extending protections to oppressed castes will in no way scapegoat the Hindu community specifically. To claim that adding caste to anti-discrimination policy is anti-Hindu distracts attention from the pressing issue of caste discrimination by making privileged caste Hindus and not oppressed castes into the real victims.

Argument 3: Such protections would unconstitutionally single out and target Hindus of Indian and South Asian descent as members of a suspect class.

Extending protections to oppressed castes will in no way scapegoat Hindus. This is tantamount to saying that race as a protected category scapegoats whites or that gender as a protected category scapegoats men.

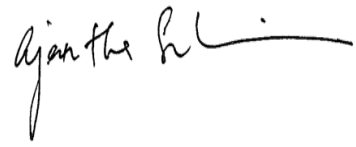
Argument 4: Such protections are going to create divisions where they simply do not exist.

The argument that caste discrimination is not a reality in the U.S. simply does not hold. The case brought against Cisco Systems by California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing and the numerous testimonies from oppressed caste individuals that followed its filing show that these forms of discrimination continue to operate in the U.S. Privileged castes in the U.S. may well insist that caste is non-existent. But just as race-blindness does not erase racial privilege or disadvantage, caste-blindness does not erase caste privilege or disadvantage. Indeed, the claim that caste is non-existent is itself an expression of privilege that belies the experiences of oppressed castes.

It is only by extending such protections that we can make visible caste inequality and discrimination in the U.S. In order to protect caste-oppressed populations, we have to be willing to insist that protection against discrimination cannot stop at the minority boundary. We have to

be willing to go further and recognize that there are minorities within minorities who need recognition and protection. I commend you again for your leadership in this effort.

Thank you so much for your time,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ajantha Subramanian". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Ajantha Subramanian
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