

Subject: Statement in Support of the Seattle City Council Proposed Ordinance Banning Casteism

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From: Dheepa Sundaram <dheepa.sundaram@gmail.com>

To: LEG_CouncilMembers <council@seattle.gov>

CAUTION: External Email

Dear Members of the Seattle City Council,

I write to you today to offer my strong, unequivocal support for the [first-in-the-nation legislation](#) introduced by Seattle [Councilmember Kshama Sawant](#) (District 3, Central Seattle), chair of the Sustainability and Renters' Rights Committee, to ban caste-based discrimination. A collective effort of Ambedkarite organizations along with allies has led to the adoption of Anti Caste Discrimination resolutions at [Brandeis University](#), [California State University](#) (CSU), [Harvard Graduate Students Union-United Auto Workers](#) (HGSU-UAW), [Brown University](#), [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) (NAACP), [Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance](#) (APALA), AFL-CIO, and the [California Democratic Party](#) are some of the names in the growing list of institutions that have endorsed caste equity and added caste to their non-discriminatory policies. This legislation would further the goals of caste abolition and most importantly, ensure the full force of US civil rights protections to caste-oppressed communities in Seattle.

As a dominant caste South Asian-American woman from a Hindu background, who is cis-gendered, able-bodied, and an assistant professor of Hindu Studies at a prominent institution in the US, I hold several privileges including those of class, caste, and profession. I also navigate the challenges of being a brown woman and the daughter of immigrants in predominantly white spaces. It is from this positionality that I write in support of these vital protections against caste-based discrimination.

I wish to make three main points regarding why this legislation is crucial to advancing the core values of civil rights in the US:

1. Caste is a social, cultural, and political hierarchy rooted in pre-modern Hindu texts that continues to proliferate in several religious and cultural communities both within and outside South Asia.
2. Hindus can and do reject caste-based practices and can do so ethically by acknowledging them as part of the tradition and seeking to build more inclusive communities. To suggest that caste practices are not part of Hinduism or not embedded within other South Asian cultural and religious communities is deeply problematic. Such assertions negate the testimonies of caste-oppressed people, efface the scriptural and cultural practices of casteism within Hinduism and other South Asian religions, and require caste oppressed communities to continually recount traumatic experiences of caste violence and oppression to expose the intracultural hegemonies that structure and shape South Asian communities in the US.
3. Anti-Discrimination policies that include protections against caste discrimination do not harm Hindus specifically or South Asians in general. Rather, they offer an important corrective to bring civil rights protections in the US in line with the protections already provided to other oppressed groups and show that privilege and oppression are intersectional and not zero-sum.

Caste operates within South Asian communities of all religious backgrounds, and it continues to constrain social and cultural practices, including marriage, meal sharing, employment and educational opportunities, and friendships. It also impacts the political sphere within India as dominant caste members hold the majority of political offices, judgeships, and other institutional positions of power. In the US, most Hindus who hold elected office, professor positions at universities, managerial and CEO positions at companies, etc. have a dominant caste background.

A [2018 study by Equality Labs](#), an educational and advocacy organization dedicated to anti-caste initiatives, found that 1 in 3

Dalit students experience caste discrimination in the US. This study along with the testimony of students and allies of caste oppressed groups have prompted several universities (California State University System, Brown University, Colby College, and Brandeis University) to include caste in their anti-discrimination policy for students, staff, and faculty. Most importantly, recognition of casteism in the South Asian diaspora is important because of what it signals to dominant caste groups: They might be racialized and minoritized by virtue of their ethnicity, but they can still have privilege and oppress others based on other identities they hold.

As an educator, I have seen first hand the pernicious impacts of caste-based discrimination both within and outside of South Asia. Further, despite being a racialized person in the US, I have also witnessed how caste continues to operate within the Hindu communities which I engage both personally and professionally. It continues to restrict access to opportunity, equity in employment and educational contexts, and stratify social, cultural, and religious practices within South Asian communities in the US.

This legislation recognizes that civil rights protections in the US cannot be suspended or abrogated because they may conflict with religious views or cultural practices of a community or be uncomfortable for members of that community. Extending civil rights protections to caste-oppressed groups does not negate the harms Hindus suffer from white supremacy or amplify or stoke hate against Hindus. Rather, it affirms the core values of civil rights as human rights. Protection against caste discrimination recognizes that Dalit and caste-oppressed groups deserve to have these protections extended to them in line with the US's commitment to protection against discrimination in all its forms.

For these reasons, I strongly endorse the proposed ordinance by the Seattle City Council to ban casteism.

Please feel free to reach out if more information or clarification on why this legislation is a crucial move towards creating a more just and equitable society is needed. Thank you for your time.

Cordially,
Dheepa Sundaram

Dheepa Sundaram, PhD (she/her/hers)
Assistant Professor of Religious Studies
IRISE Fellow
Sturm Hall 269
303.871.2888
University of Denver
Cheyenne and Arapaho Territories
Co-chair, North American Hinduism Unit, American Academy of Religion
Website: globalizingdharma.com
Twitter: @themosisyphus