

Subject: Statement from the South Asia Scholar Activist Collective in Support of the Seattle City Council's Proposed Ordinance Banning Caste-based discrimination
Date: Tuesday, February 14, 2023 at 12:03:46 PM Pacific Standard Time
From: Dheepa Sundaram <dheepa.sundaram@gmail.com>
To: LEG_CouncilMembers <council@seattle.gov>
CC: Stone, Meredith <Meredith.Stone@seattle.gov>, campaign@ambedkarinternationalcenter.org <campaign@ambedkarinternationalcenter.org>

CAUTION: External Email

Dear Seattle City Council Members:

Statement of Support for Seattle's Anti-caste Discrimination Ordinance

February 14, 2023

By the South Asia Scholar Activist Collective ([SASAC](#))

The South Asia Scholar Activist Collective (SASAC), an organization of scholars advocating for inclusive politics and academic freedom in teaching and scholarship on South Asia, strongly supports the [draft ordinance](#) put forward by Kshama Sawant for consideration by the Seattle, WA city council that seeks to add caste to the city's anti-discrimination policy. In doing so, the city council would take an important step taken by universities such as the California State University System, Brown University, Brandeis University, and Colby College to offer protections against caste-based discrimination in education, employment, and access to public services provided by the city of Seattle. This ordinance would offer the first city-based protections against caste discrimination in the US and offer a model for such legislation at the state and federal levels, offering equity of access and redress for harm for those marginalized by caste position.

As scholars of South Asia, we would like to make 4 main points to show why this legislation is needed, is not discriminatory against any ethnic or religious group, and why it is an important civil rights issue in the US, particularly within educational contexts:

1. Caste is pervasive. It is a social, cultural, and political hierarchy justified in pre-modern Hindu legal texts in the form of *varna* (class or category) and *jati* (birth group). It spread historically beyond Hindu communities and flourishes as a practice today in Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Jain, and other South Asian religious groups. Caste continues to proliferate both within and outside of the Indian subcontinent.
2. Caste is inherently discriminatory. The caste system ranks people according to the overlapping categories of *varna* and *jati* in a descending pyramid of human worth. It has long been a critical part of religious practices for some, while being fiercely rejected by others, but it has persisted and arguably strengthened in modern times.
3. Anti-casteism policies that include protections against caste discrimination protect, rather than harm, Hindus and people of South Asian origin. Many people of South Asian heritage are themselves lower caste or Dalit and thus disenfranchised within their own communities. Policies that protect them from discrimination offer an important corrective to bring civil rights protections in the US in line with the protections already provided to other marginalized oppressed groups and prevent oppression of the most vulnerable within South Asian communities. Without explicit recognition of caste discrimination, it is very difficult for caste-oppressed individuals to find redress. Existing legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of religion, race,

ethnicity or national origin are inadequate, since many victims share all these characteristics with their victimizers. The only people such legislation will adversely affect are those who discriminate against or dehumanize others on the basis of caste prejudice.

4. Higher education needs protections against caste-based discrimination and as scholars and teachers in US universities, we welcome the expansion of such protections.

Please reach out if clarification and/or explanation of any of the above points is needed. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Cordially,

Dheepa Sundaram (on behalf of the South Asia Scholar Activist Collective)

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