

Subject: caste protections

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From: Sonja Thomas <smthomas@colby.edu>

To: LEG_CouncilMembers <council@seattle.gov>

CAUTION: External Email

Dear Seattle city council,

My name is Sonja Thomas and I am an associate professor at Colby College. In Oct 2021, Colby became the second college in the US (after Brandeis) to add caste as a protected category to our [non-discrimination policy](#). Students, faculty (such as myself), and the administration did this together--united. We educated Colby faculty, students, and staff about what casteism is, how it occurs in the US, and especially, how casteism can affect oppressed caste students in higher education. And we received no pushback whatsoever.

This is because when people are educated (rather than remain in ignorance) as to the ways casteism is embedded into the social fabric and manifests itself in segregation, employment and housing discrimination, education discrimination, sexual harassment and violence, in intimidation and exclusions, it really is a no-brainer to make sure that the peoples affected by casteism are protected and are able to seek recourse.

Casteism is a human rights violation. And in adding caste to our non discrimination policy, our community stood up for human rights.

I'm writing to the city council to encourage you to likewise stand up for human rights and to express my firm support for the addition of caste to Seattle's non-discrimination policy.

While we normally associate caste with South Asia, casteism can function in other areas of the world as well, and it migrates with the diaspora. Casteism can also be seen in multiple religions.

I research [caste in Christianity](#) in India, and in the US Indian Christian community. It is FALSE to equate recognizing caste as discriminating against a religious minority. Such a smoke and mirrors tactic fails to protect oppressed caste Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists while it simultaneously diverts attention away from the experiences that so many caste oppressed Hindus have been sharing with news media and in public testimonies in the US. Christians are a minority in India, but those Christians with caste power can still perpetuate casteism. In the same way, religious minorities in the US with caste power can still perpetuate casteism.

Unfortunately, there are a few caste privileged individuals in the US who are spreading misinformation about casteism. (I've written about that misinformation [here](#)). The majority of Indian Americans in the US are caste privileged. And Indian Americans are the most wealthy racial minorities in the US. Because those with caste and class power see themselves represented in movies, television, literature, art, and politics, their caste privilege is taken to be "the norm" and their voice seems to be the loudest. Caste power is often invisibilized in the diaspora as we make demands on Dalit Bahujan oppressed caste peoples to continually share their stories of trauma, exclusions, and discriminations before those who do not experience this form of discrimination are swayed to act.

Thus, I doubly urge the city council to listen to the voices of oppressed caste peoples in the US, to understand how casteism affects people in multiple religions including Christianity, and to add caste as a protected category.

If you have any questions and would like to talk in depth, please don't hesitate to reach out to me.

All the best,

~Sonja Thomas

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Hey! Buy my book, it's awesome

[Privileged Minorities: Syrian Christianity, Gender, and Minority Rights in Postcolonial India](#)

***my latest, on dispelling myths surrounding the recognition of caste in non-discrimination policies in the US**

[The Smoke and Mirrors of Casteism in the US](#)