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Hindu Americans Take Exception to Kshama Sawant's Proposed Inclusion of Caste in Non-discrimination Policy

BY STAFF WRITER ([HTTPS://AMERICANKAHANI.COM/AUTHOR/STAFFWRITER/](https://americankahani.com/author/staffwriter/))
FEBRUARY 14, 2023

The Hindu American Foundation's leadership accuses the Indian American Seattle City Council Member of negatively implicating an entire ethnic minority community.



The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) has written a letter to Seattle City Attorney Ann Davidson apprising her of the organization's concerns about Seattle City Council member Kshama Sawant's proposed inclusion of caste in Seattle's non-discrimination policy. "We share the admirable goals of standing up for civil rights and eliminating all forms of prejudice and discrimination, including based on caste," reads the letter, signed by executive director Suhag Shukla, managing director Samir Kalra, and co-founder Nikhil Joshi.

Noting that “incidents of caste discrimination should be brought to light, thoroughly investigated and rectified,” if and when they occur, HAF leaders added that “the legislative intent and impact of Sawant’s proposal unfairly singles out and targets an entire community on the basis of their national origin and ancestry for disparate treatment, thereby violating the very policy the resolution seeks to amend, not to mention Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.”

Last month, Sawant proposed legislation to create “protections against caste discrimination. In a Jan. 24 statement, Sawant said her office is proud to bring forward first-in-the-nation legislation (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1t0dM0xpxZw5N7Iskjo7nHzOJxfta1dxB/edit>) for our city to ban caste-based discrimination, in solidarity with our South Asian and other immigrant community members, and all working people.”

“The legislation will ban caste-based discrimination in our city, prohibit businesses from discriminating based on caste with respect to hiring, tenure, promotion, workplace conditions, or wages, and ban discrimination based on caste in places of public accommodation”

In her statements to the press, Sawant said “the caste system was consciously and systematically developed by the ruling classes in South Asia and other parts of the world for thousands of years, in order to exploit the mass of ordinary people by using a divide-and-conquer strategy.” Hence, “the only way to end caste, racial, gender, and other oppressions is for the working class to fight for a different kind of world,” she argued.

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The Greater Seattle area, which has one of the largest concentrations of South Asians living in Washington state (over 167,000), “must address caste discrimination, and not allow it to remain invisible and unaddressed,” Sawant said. Emphasizing that “caste discrimination doesn’t only take place in other countries,” she noted how “it is faced by South Asian American and other immigrant working people in their workplaces, including in the tech sector, in Seattle and in cities around the country.”

Responding to the above statements, HAF said Sawant “not only makes clear the target of her policy proposal, she negatively implicates an entire ethnic minority community.” The letter noted how “the addition of ‘caste’ is a striking departure from the well-established practice of facially neutral policies that apply broadly and generally to all people regardless of background or identity. That this category calls for treating disparately members of a group on the basis of their national origin or ancestry is the very definition of discriminatory, and a denial of both equal protection and due process. It also further exacerbates misconceptions about Indians, and in effect seeks to institutionalize implicit bias about all people of Indian/South Asian descent as members of a suspect class as a matter of policy.

If approved by the City Council, “the legislation will ban caste-based discrimination in our city, prohibit businesses from discriminating based on caste with respect to hiring, tenure, promotion, workplace conditions, or wages, and ban discrimination based on caste in places of public accommodation, such as hotels, public transportation, public restrooms, or retail establishments,” Sawant said. “The law will also prohibit housing discrimination based on caste in rental housing leases, property sales, and mortgage loans.” The city will join several national organizations and universities in banning caste discrimination.

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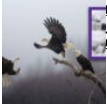
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