February 16, 2023

Seattle City Council
PO Box 94728, Seattle, WA, 98124-4728
Council@seattle.gov

Dear Seattle City Council Members,

We are the Feminist Critical Hindu Studies Collective (FCHS) and we are writing our second letter of support for the historic ordinance proposed by Councilmember Kshama Sawant to ban caste-based discrimination in Seattle city. It has come to our attention that Dalit civil rights organizations like Equality Labs are facing ongoing attacks, disinformation, and bigotry while engaged in advocacy around this ordinance. We write this email not only to endorse all of the Dalit Civil rights organizations work to ban caste in Seattle, but also to debunk from our academic perspective as experts, and members of the Hindu community, some of the most heinous arguments against these civil rights leaders.

Our background

Feminist Critical Hindu Studies Collective (FCHS) was founded in 2018. The ethics of FCHS begins with an awareness that contestations over the category "Hinduism" are political and, therefore, studying Hinduism is always also political. In every context in which we encounter it, we must interrogate how Hinduism is being constructed and by whom, who is served by the forms of power it enables, and what forms of injustice it perpetuates or resists. Employing the term "Hindu formations," FCHS seeks to examine the intersecting processes of racialization, the regulation of sexuality, and the violence of caste. Using the idea of Hindu formations, we hope that scholars and students will come to better understand the ways in which religious traditions emerge over time and are deployed to various ends. FCHS asserts that the categories—Hinduism and Hindu—not only arise in conjunction with forms of white supremacy and caste supremacy but are imbricated with them. Currently, with the generous support of the Wabash Center for Learning & Teaching Theology, we are engaged in a project to explore Critical Hindu Pedagogies, with a cohort of other scholars from institutions of higher education from throughout the country.

Debunking Bigotry

After reviewing much of the opponents messaging and submissions to the council formwe have identified some of the following points to share.

1. All of the groups that oppose this issue including Coalition of North American Hindus, Hindu American Foundation, Hindu Pact, and others are known to take extreme positions in the Hindu community and are led by dominant caste leadership that is aligned with right

wing ethnonationalist movements in India. They have a long history of opposing caste equity and are continuous in their attempts to preserve caste privilege for the bigoted. They use intimidation tactics like bullying, cyber harassment, disinformation, and litigation to try to stop their opponents. As scholars who work on Hindu traditions in South Asia and the American diaspora, we can assure you that these organizations do not represent the entirety of Hindu Americans. In fact, there is a cultural war in our community as to what constitutes a Hindu in a time when our community is deeply polarized around issues of caste and genocide. Progressive Hindu organizations such as Hindus for Human Rights and Sadhana that work alongside Dalit civil rights organizations. As scholars of Hindu studies, the FCHS Collective stands with Dalit civil rights organizations like Equality Labs, and we urge the council not to allow the aforementioned Hindu organizations to be the only voice in an ideologically diverse Hindu American community; that would be akin to saying the Proud Boys are reflective of all white people.

2. There are repeated attempts to attack the coalition of Dalit civil rights organizations who are working on this issue like Equality Labs and Ambedkar King Study Circle as anti-Hindu and anti-Dalit. This absurd line of attack that we have seen repeated by these fringe bad actors who want to use alarmist smears and innuendos to delegitimize the urgent work of Dalit civil rights organizations. As scholars of dominant caste Hindu descent who study Hindu traditions in the North American academy, we have stood with Equality Labs and critiqued organizations such as HAF and CoHNA for their ongoing perpetuation of discourses on Hinduphobia. For example, in our recent article, "Hindu fragility and the politics of mimicry in North America," we draw attention to the ongoing efforts by Equality Labs to support caste protections in the tech industry and higher education. The response by North American Hindu groups of invoking Hinduphobia is a supremacist narrative that invokes the rhetoric and strategies employed by North American white Christian conservatives.

In reality, there are many dominant caste Hindus who partner with and support Dalit civil rights organizations. **It is not anti-Hindu to fight for caste abolition**. As researchers, we know that many everyday people in the Hindu community are exploring and reflecting on how to center those that have been historically harmed by caste discrimination and violence.

3. There are several incorrect arguments that we have found that conservative Hindu organizations like HAF and CoHNA repeatedly level against anti-caste activists and organizations. Below, we identify and respond to each one.

Their allegation: Equality Lab's survey data is falsified and their assertions about caste are rebutted by The Carnegie Endowment Survey on Indian American Attitudes.

Our response:
This disinformation tactic has become one of the key talking points that is iterated by the opponents to caste equity. Whether it is in argument from Coalition of Hindus of North American, Hindu American Foundation, or opponents in Seattle like Debadutta Dash this harmful talking point is insidious not just because it is false but also for the corrosive and casual dismissal of such an important data set in the field of South Asian American studies. Equality Labs is a well-respected community based research organization that has worked for many years

with scholars across the discipline of feminist, South Asian and Asian American studies.
This report is used by researchers around the world, it is an essential part of the syllabus in North America. Additionally, it is now formally a part of the library of congress. We stand behind this data set and acknowledge the violence inflicted on Equality Labs for holding this first data set and also how difficult it is to conduct research on caste because of the severity of caste bigotry in our community. Any attempt to besmirch the reputation or to assert this data set is false, and we and hundreds of other scholars in the field would agree to that.

The specific points that differ between Equality Labs survey, which was explicitly on caste, and the Carnegie Endowments reports on Indian American attitudes in 2020, include:

- The Carnegie Endowment report focuses on Indian Americans and Equality Labs focuses on immigrants from all South Asian ethnic immigrant groups including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. and Indentured communities.

- The authors of Carnegie Endowment report have not disclosed their caste location while Equality Labs authors and research team were explicit about their Dalit Identity. Casteless authorship is not neutral. It is a reflection of the authors not being transparent in their caste location. There is no neutrality when it comes to researchers and it is important that they disclose their backgrounds to better understand their biases. Further, the Carnegie Endowment report did not consult with any leading U.S. based caste oppressed civil rights organizations or researchers in crafting the survey portions that speak to caste. As a result, there are some serious methodological flaws and ethical gaps given that Indigenous and racial epistemic battles in knowledge production have pushed for researchers to be in relationship with and accountable to marginalized groups they intend to study. This is even more important for this survey as it attempts to argue with data inferences about Dalits that has had harmful ongoing impact.

- One such methodological flaw of the Carnegie Endowment report is that **caste questions were only asked of Hindu participants despite caste practices existing in all religious communities**. That was a massive oversight especially since faiths like Islam, Christianity, and Sikhs, have large numbers of caste oppressed people.

- Even more egregious is that out of the 1200 respondents, 632 are Hindu, and 293 identify with a caste group. Of those 293, 83% identify themselves as "general or upper caste," 1% as Dalit/ Scheduled Caste, and 16% as an "Other Backward Community." Calculating what this means in absolute numbers, this indicates that there were very few in the whole sample who were ready to say openly that they belong to the castes that we know to be the main targets of caste-discrimination.
  - o 293 identified as members of caste groups
  - o 83% were upper caste (total of 243 respondents)
  - o 16% were "other backward caste" (total of 47 respondents)
  - o 1% was Dalit (total of 3 respondents)

  You would not guess from media coverage and disinformation of this study, which imply that caste discrimination is negligible to non-existent in the Indian American community.

We question the legitimacy of a study that can make such a large claim about caste discrimination on the basis of surveying 3 or 4 people from the harmed communities.

- The authors in footnote 29 also stated this about the Equality Labs Survey: "This study relied on a nonrepresentative snowball sampling method to recruit respondents. Furthermore, respondents who did not disclose a caste identity were dropped from the data set. Therefore, it is likely that the sample does not fully represent the South Asian American population and could skew in favor of those who have strong views about caste. While the existence of caste discrimination in India is incontrovertible, its precise extent and intensity in the United States can be contested." In the sociological and statistical research, particularly when working with vulnerable groups, snowball sampling (or chain sampling, chain-referral sampling, referral sampling) is a nonprobability sampling technique where existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances. Thus, the sample group is said to grow like a rolling snowball. As the sample builds up, enough data are gathered to be useful for research.

  This was very much the case for Dalit Americans in 2016 when we conducted this survey. The harassment and threats that Equality Labs endures now show this remains the case today. For vulnerable communities like Dalits, snowball sampling is one way to document the voice of the oppressed. Especially given the resistance of the majority, dominant caste diaspora to break the silence on caste. Many Dalits were afraid and spoke openly about their fear regarding what would happen if they were outed. Despite that fear, people trusted the Equality Labs team and they built on that trust by reaching out to hundreds of South Asian groups across caste, language and political spectrums. We agree with this footnote in that there should be more research, but dispute that this survey is not a foundational initial contribution to understanding the scope and breadth of caste discrimination in the U.S.

Their allegation: Caste discrimination does not exist in the US.

Our response:
Equality Labs found that 1 in 4 Dalits experience physical or verbal assault, 1 in 3 experience discrimination in universities, and 2 out of 3 face discrimination in the workplaces. This is also why half of all Dalits who took this survey chose to remain unnamed for fear of the consequences of being outed.

In addition, in 2022 the National Academic Coalition for Caste Equity and Equality Labs also conducted the *Caste in Higher Education Conference and Survey*, the preliminary analysis of which revealed that within U.S. higher education, 4 in 5 caste-oppressed students, staff, and faculty reported experiencing caste-discrimination at the hands of their dominant caste peers. Further, 3 out of 4 caste-oppressed stakeholders did not report caste-based discrimination in their universities or colleges because caste was not added as a protected category and/or their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion departments lacked caste competency due to a lack of provisions and trainings.

These are troubling statistics, reflecting the serious extent of caste oppression. In the face of stiff opposition from caste-privileged communities, we have also publicized such stories in mainstream outlets like [NPR](), [CNN](), *[Washington Post,]() [Harpers Bazaar,]() [PRI,]() [New York Times,]() [Time]()*, [Vice](), [Wired](), [BBC](), [Slate](), *[New Yorker]()*, and more.

The reality can no longer be denied: [Caste discrimination exists, and South Asians have brought it to the U.S.]() Like other systems of discrimination, it must be tackled through the enforcement of civil rights law.

Their allegation: A bill like this will cause South Asians to lose jobs

Our response:
This is a statement rooted in fear not evidence. There is no known evidence that shows that employers will stop hiring a protected class of people because they have been established as a protected class. This is not how civil rights law works, and using this same logic one could say employers are not hiring Black people because they fear that they will be subjected to legal action related to racial discrimination, or the same might be said in regard to queer people, the protected class of gender expression and/or sexual orientation.

Their allegation: We have not seen caste discrimination therefore it does not exist

Our response:
These are the arguments of the privileged. Of course, privileged people do not see caste. That is part of their privilege. Hundreds of testimonies have now come into the Seattle City council about first-person accounts of caste discrimination. This coupled with the data should firmly establish its existence and the need for remedy.

Their allegation: Even with institutions that have added caste there are no reports. This is a solution to a problem that does not exist.

Our response:
This is another bad faith argument and reflects a complete misunderstanding of protected categories work. Reports of discrimination especially in workplaces and universities are anonymous to protect individuals who report. We should not be hearing about those cases because it would be a violation of privacy. It is unclear why these organizations feel like they would be privy to federally protected information, under Title IX and VII laws.

Their allegation: This is a malicious bill and is design to target hardworking Indians of merit

Our response:
This is a reiteration of the Asian American model minority trope, and it is not rooted in evidence but again fear and fragility. This bill only targets those who discriminate.

Their allegation: South Asians are unfairly targeted and face racial profiling

Our response:
There is no racial profiling in adding caste as a protected category. People who will avail themselves of caste include those of South Asian origin and also any minority within a minority that experiences discrimination based on work and descent. As such, these categories are taken up by those who have experienced harm and who will raise these issues to appropriate human rights and civil rights personnel to anchor the investigation into the protected class of the victim and the mindset of the perpetrator. There is no racial profiling involved.

Their allegation: Dalit civil rights groups and individuals are fronts for terrorist organizations in Pakistan and separatist movements.

Our response:
This is an absurd claim to have to rebut, and it reflects the broader trend of Islamophobia within Hindu organizations As scholars of Hindu studies, we want to underscore that such critiques are rooted in centuries of caste violence, religious bigotry, and Islamophobia, and no serious legislator should listen to such bigoted attacks.

Their allegation: This ordinance unfairly targets Hindus.

Our response:
This is untrue as caste is found in communities across South Asia and in other cultural and historical contexts. In South Asia, forms of caste difference exist among Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and other religious communities. Recently, Shahira Bangar wrote that her "Dalit Sikh family faced unrelenting caste violence in the diaspora" and that she has been bullied by dominant caste Sikh children. Shahira's article tells us two things: 1). caste apartheid and caste violence exist in non-Hindu communities; and 2). caste violence is taught to children, even here in the diaspora, meaning that caste-dominant parents have work to do, akin to the work that white parents have to do in terms of teaching their children equality and kindness as opposed to oppression and hate. This ordinance would bring attention to caste violence, which is an initial step in stemming this violence.

Their allegation: The ordinance is unfair because caste is a complex issue and requires nuance.

Our response:
Caste is a complex social issue, but legislation to prevent caste discrimination is not. Discrimination under all American civil rights and International human rights law is illegal and local governments are in jeopardy if they create liability for themselves by not preventing discrimination that exists within the city. Arguments for nuance are another way of dismissing the urgency and punting responsibility for discrimination on the excluded.

Their allegation: The ordinance falsely claims that "caste" is a hereditary system sanctioned by law or religion.

Our response:
This is simply not true. Historically caste rules and laws existed into the 20th century, and caste practices continue to be socially and culturally pervasive. Without going into centuries of legal history of the subcontinent, we can cite one example from Nepal. From the work of Sebash Nepali in his paper "The Role of Dalit Civil Society in Combatting Caste-Based Discrimination," he writes, "Nepal's first written law, the Civil Code of 1854, "sanctioned and privileged functions of the Brahmins as spiritual teachers and priests," and Chhetris, particularly Shah and Ranas "were members by birth of the highest legislative and judicial body." Brahmins were also employed at court as performers of the state cult or as advisers to bhardari kausal (a council of nobles). Royal descents were secured for the Shah and Rana clans of the Chhetri caste. In addition, the Code arranged the justice system structured in a hierarchical order with severe forms of punishment for Sudra or peasant castes. It applied the caste rules to law in all areas, including food and beverages, sex and marriage, and property rights. Oppressed caste people faced greater punishments than dominant people for the same crime. For example, as late as 1940, Tanka Prasad Acharya, a Nepali Brahmin, was imprisoned for protesting the autocratic regime as per caste-based justice. His four friends, who were non-Brahmin and charged with the same crime, were hanged and shot to death. This law continued to dictate Nepali society until 56 years ago.

We should not need any other further refutation of these points.

We are happy to address any of these points further as we believe this disinformation is intended to harm the necessary civil rights organizing across Seattle and the nation around caste equity. As dominant caste allies and scholars committed to feminist, intersectional, anti-caste work, it is our moral responsibility to stand forward at this time and also offer our continued academic expertise if you need any further questions. We believe documented evidence and scholarship on caste and religion should inform this evidence driven process towards providing remedy to grave caste discrimination.

Thank you,

Feminist Critical Hindu Studies Collective
      Dr. Shreena Gandhi, Michigan State University
      Dr. Sailaja Krishnamurti, Queen's University
      Dr. Harshita Mruthinti Kamath, Emory University
      Dr. Shana Sippy, Centre College