



We uplift the lives of marginalized through Education and Health

February 14, 2023

Seattle City Council
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Dear Seattle City Council Members:

We are writing to you as a coalition of interfaith, intercaste, and multi-racial communities who work on the civil rights of caste-oppressed Americans. Collectively, we have over fifty years of experience supporting the rights of vulnerable caste-oppressed people in North America and in our homelands. We represent **hundreds of thousands of caste-oppressed Americans** and we are the verified representatives of caste-oppressed Americans with officials at all levels of government including federal, state, and municipal entities. Our organizations have presented testimony to Congress, to the EEOC, to the Human Rights Commission, and to state political parties and Governor's offices. With this mandate, **we are unified in our urgent request to vote YES on the Seattle Caste Ordinance that calls for the inclusion of caste as a protected category in Seattle city's non-discrimination policy,**

Seattle city is home to a sizable South Asian population, many of whom contribute immensely to local education, corporate, and community organizations. And, while we experience significant discrimination on the basis of race, we also experience significant discrimination within our community on the basis of caste. This system, which may not be as visible to the city council, is a well recognized system of exclusion—both in our homelands and within intergovernmental bodies like the UN, the EU, and many others.

Caste-Oppression and Discrimination is also an American problem

That is why it is crucial that the Seattle City Council vote “yes” on this historic ordinance. Caste is a system of exclusion affecting South Asian communities. **It impacts over 5.6 million South Asian Americans** and also would include any community that experiences discrimination based on work and cultural origin. Caste is found in all religions and regions of South Asia, with the caste system replicated in South Asian diasporic communities, including the Pakistani, Indian, Nepali, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, and Girit (descendants of indentured peoples) immigrant communities. To that end, the Seattle members of our organizations **have all reported significant**



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discrimination within Seattle; we have included some of those stories in an appendix to this email.

Data supports the breadth and depth of Caste-Oppression and Discrimination in the US

What is critical to know is these stories are not the individual cases, but the fact that they are part of a pattern of systemic discrimination, consistent with the findings in the first ever survey on caste discrimination in the United States, conducted by the Dalit civil rights organization [Equality Labs](#). In that report, it was determined that 1 in 4 Dalit Americans reported experiencing verbal or physical assault because of their caste, and 1 in 3 Dalit students reported experiencing discrimination during the course of their education. Even more alarming was that 2 out of 3 Dalits reported experiencing caste discrimination in their workplaces. Equality Labs's findings on the state of caste-discrimination in the US are corroborated by publications from several reputable sources including [NPR](#), [CNN](#), [Washington Post](#), [Harpers Bazaar](#), [PRI](#), [New York Times](#), [Time](#), [Vice](#), [Wired](#), [BBC](#) and more. Furthermore, recent lawsuits like the [Cisco Caste](#), and the [BAPS temple case](#) show the growing problem of caste in the workplace and how urgently caste equality should be a goal across many industries.

Right-Wing Extremists and Bigots are using harm to silence proponents of caste-equity

As one of the organizations who helped disseminate the survey, we are dismayed that bigots are attempting to tarnish the reputation of Dalit civil rights organizations and our research. This overwhelming body of evidence cannot be overlooked in good faith—especially as our organizations have risked our lives, our safety, and the safety of our children to come out on this critical issue. **Members of our organization have faced rape threats, death threats, attempts to out our identities, workplace investigations, and more violent activity for simply organizing for our rights.** The fact that we must endure this violence is another indication of how urgently this ordinance is needed.

Disinformation on Caste mirrors the tactics used to silence racial justice and gender justice advocates More importantly, **every movement advocating for civil rights will face opposition from those who wish to preserve the right to remain bigoted.**

Not surprisingly, these attacks are part of a larger pattern of right-wing institutions who want to denigrate and de-platform civil rights organizations from pursuing their legally-protected rights to advocate for themselves. Just as Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Ijeomo Olu and other black scholars are having to face bans in the right-wing blowback against critical race theory, we see the opponents to this ordinance as organizations rooted in bigotry who are determined to use any means



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possible—including disinformation, insinuations, and lies—to de-platform our communities from democratic processes.

We encourage the Seattle City Council not to fall victim to any attempts to distract from the voice of Dalits and caste-oppressed immigrants seeking remedy from caste discrimination. It is the story of caste-oppressed people that must drive this critical civil rights issue—not the caste privileged who have already benefited from centuries of exploitation of Dalit communities and would now want to continue that history of oppression again, here in the United States. This legal measure is critical for the safety and well-being of *all* Seattle citizens, workers, and students.

We also want to assure you: the issue of caste discrimination is not complex. The only people opposed to caste being added as a protected category are those for whom equity feels oppressive because they are worried about losing their caste privilege. In fact, the opposite is true. When people drop their privilege, they may lose some small benefits—but, they, in turn, gain back their full humanity. We urge you to not be intimidated or bullied by casteist disinformation that is designed to intimidate and harass and ultimately de-platform Dalit and caste-oppressed communities. We ask, instead, that you stand with and create safe harbors for our caste-oppressed neighbors, friends, co-workers, faith leaders, and family members, so that they can safely come out and exercise their rights.

Without institutional support and protection, caste-oppressed people in the university, corporate and non-profit spaces will have to endure continued discrimination. While it is completely lawful to add caste as a protected category, the city will be failing in its civil rights obligation if it allows caste discrimination to endure within the city without this ordinance's swift intervention.

The only remedy is to add caste as a protected category. Caste-oppressed people in America lack institutional support and protection. By adding caste as a protected category, it would allow a new channel of support for caste-oppressed people to share their grievances and additional pathways for remedies. It would also allow for the building of caste equity competency across the city and create sanctuary for Dalit communities who have faced decades of exclusion in the city. That is why we strongly believe that making caste a protected category will only expand the dignity and rights for *all* Seattle residents.

In conclusion **we urge you to vote YES on the caste ordinance.** For, to heal from caste, we must ban it, and we ask you to stand *now*, to ensure Seattle is a welcoming city for all.

Ambedkar Association of North America (AANA), All donations are tax exempted under US 501(c) (3), Employer ID: 26-2793893; DLN. #: 17053278312040; Public Charity Status: 170(b) (A) (vi). Email: aanusa@gmail.com; URL: www.aanusa.org



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In Solidarity,

[AANA \(Ambedkar Association of North America\)](#)
[ABAT \(Ambedkar Buddhist Association of Texas\)](#)
[AIC \(Ambedkar International Center\)](#)
[Ambedkarite International Co-Ordination Society](#)
[AIM \(Ambedkar International Mission\)](#)
[Ambedkar International Mission Center Houston , USA \(AIM\)](#)
[Ambedkarites International Mission Society-Canada \(AIMS\)](#)
[Ambedkar International Social Reform Organization \(AISRO\) Canada](#)
[Ambedkar Times](#)
[BSAC \(Boston south asian coalition\)](#)
[BSG \(Boston Study Group\)](#)
[Begmpura Cultural Society of NY](#)
[CAPI \(Coalition of Americans for Pluralism in India\)](#)
[CSIA \(Coalition of Seattle Indian Americans\)](#)
[Desh Doaba](#)
[Dhamma Waves](#)
[Equality Labs](#)
[FFEI \(Friends for Education International\)](#)
[International Bahujan Organization](#)
[International Boddhisativa Guru Ravidass Organization Inc](#)
[Guru Ravidas Sabha, Bay area, California](#)
[GNF \(Global NRI Forum\)](#)
[NACCE \(National Academic Coalition for Caste Equity\)](#)
[PASC \(Periyar Ambedkar Study Circle\)](#)
[Periyar International USA](#)
[Saman Sangh](#)
[Shri Guru Ravidas Temple, Pittsburg, CA](#)
[South Asian Dalit Adivasi Network, Canada-SADAN](#)

Select Caste Oppressed and Allied Testimonies of Seattle Based Members

A Seattle-based architectural designer and Dalit Christian: “I come from an oppressed caste in India. I am only the third generation in my family to have access to education. The stories of

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my ancestors have been those of forced labor and oppression until we won a democratic right to equality. Unfortunately we continue to face violent crimes. When I moved to the United States for a masters degree, my struggles with caste discrimination followed. The social exclusion of Dalit students and microaggressions towards us is a common practice amongst Indian student communities in the US. The hidden biases of caste are also a reality for generations of Indian immigrants here. However we do not have the legal protection against this human rights violation.”

A Seattle-based Dalit Technologist: I live in Seattle and I work here in a large technology company. I belong to one of the many oppressed Dalit castes and have experienced and seen those close to me experience the trauma, the stigma, and the oppression of the caste system throughout most of my life. Like the Black and other marginalized communities in the United States, Dalits have been struggling with the challenges of social segregation, perception of inferiority and stereotyping and just blatant discrimination. Among many others, I distinctly remember an incident when I was sixteen. I rented a small room, hundreds of miles away from my home and family to study at a better school. After several months, when the landlady learned about my caste, a minor dispute was enough to throw me out, with comments like "I should have asked your caste before renting out"; and "all that you people are capable of are cleaning the sewers and should stay that way". Without doubt, this experience of hate and discrimination towards a mere child scarred me and lives with me even today. Sadly, this system of caste oppression, this mindset of superiority, the implicit and explicit bias has penetrated the Indian diaspora here in the US too. However UNLIKE the other marginalized communities in the US, that are protected under the law and have a discourse for standing against racial, gender and other forms of discrimination, Dalit community largely remains hidden and suffers through it silently. Two years ago, a person at my workplace, who was subject to caste-based discrimination shared their story, anonymously, and with a lot of courage, with the leaders in the company. But it fell on deaf ears with vague promises of "doing better" but had no consequences. When a group of us urged the company to add "caste" to the anti-discrimination policy, I was told by some that "this is not a place for activism" - not in my backyard they said, for the fear of lending voice to this community and disrupting the perceived norm. I sincerely urge the council members to unanimously approve the ordinance to make caste discrimination illegal in Seattle. This will not only give a voice to us and let us be our true self without hiding our identity; but also, will have a ripple effect throughout the state, the nation and even globally as these large companies are required to amend their policies.



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A Seattle Based Dalit Survivor of Domestic Violence: I have experienced discrimination in my own home by my inlaws who come from dominant castes. They would insult me with caste slurs and look the other way when my husband would beat me for the smallest thing. I am so glad I was able to get services that understood caste, because I have heard from my other friends when they did not have that competency the added dimension of caste was not understood enough and they were denied much needed support. I urge Seattle City to pass this ordinance and make this Seattle safe for all women no matter their caste.

An Information Technology Executive working for Seattle-based multinational tech company: “I grew up as an untouchable in a small town in middle India. In our small town, I constantly witnessed stories of active discrimination against my family members in Indian academia and employment opportunities. Working in downtown Seattle for over a decade surrounded by thousands of my countrymen, my fear didn’t go down. I was worried about being outed and having a setback to my career. Like many successful people from the lower castes, I avoided talking about my identity. Some of my cousins went a step further and changed their last names to avoid getting associated with the lower caste to avoid any potential discrimination. For decades, I practiced dissonance where I actively avoided thinking about discrimination of my own people.”

A Dalit Queer Organizer: Caste is a queer issue. I was doubly in the closet both as a Dalit and as Queer organizer and faced consistent bullying and violence from dominant caste peers. When I raised this issue in my school and my workplace. When I raised this issue to the people in charge, they did not know what caste was and could not help me. Ordinances like this make it clear that caste discrimination cannot be tolerated. And I urge you to make Seattle a safe city for Dalit Queer kids like me!

A Dalit Mother and Technologist: I strongly urge the council to vote Yes on this ordinance as it will create a fair environment for people like me who are coming from oppressed caste communities. I have experienced caste discrimination from my upper caste neighbors at our local meet-up. At our first neighborhood meet-up, several dominant caste neighbors began aggressively steering the conversation to know my caste. When they finally visited my house they saw Dr Ambedkar and a Buddha Picture and learnt that I am not from their community. They have stopped coming to my place and that incident made me feel like I don't belong here. I do not want my children or anyone to face this hence I urge all council members to vote yes on the ordinance to ban the caste-based discrimination.



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A Microsoft technologist and author stated: “Dalits have little institutional support in the [tech] industry. It is difficult to file complaints of caste discrimination at work to lead to disciplinary action, especially if co-workers claim religious discrimination in response. Religion, unlike caste, is a protected category in the workplace. You can’t even bring a complaint, and the burden of proof is always going to be on the [caste-oppressed] survivor. Dalits who are born into marginalized castes in India’s rigid hierarchies have to face oppression for a long [time]. So to ban what has been carried to the US, I urge the city council to take the lead on this human rights issue.”

Raghav Kaushik, a veteran Microsoft technologist: “I work at Microsoft and I can tell you from my own experience that caste-based discrimination takes place in the Tech sector, here in this area. In 2006, when the Indian government announced affirmative action to help the oppressed castes, there was a discussion about this in the Microsoft emails thread. Various employees expressed very bigoted and hideous comments mocking caste-oppressed people, questioning their intelligence and merit. No one was held accountable for that. Microsoft (didn’t) bat an eyelid. They didn’t do anything. So caste discrimination exists right here in our midst. Caste legitimizes itself in various ways. One of the big examples is the education system, where there is an attempt by caste oppressors and right-wingers to sanitize [caste] or to minimize its horrors. Another way in which it legitimizes itself is diversity and inclusion, that is, by co-opting progressive language. For example, if you hear that India is a diverse country with 4,000 castes, you should cringe, as it is a cringe-worthy statement. It is legitimizing a horrific system. Such legitimization is a common phenomenon in this country, locally.”