

Explained | Will the Seattle move shield against caste bias?

PREMIUM

Why are Dalit rights activists calling the Seattle City Council ban on caste discrimination historic? How will it impact movements across America and the world for equal rights? What are the anti-caste laws in India?

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People celebrate the passing of an ordinance to add caste to Seattle's anti-discrimination laws in the Seattle City Council chambers on February 21, 2023, in Seattle. | Photo Credit: AP

The story so far: On February 21, the Seattle City Council became **the first U.S. city to ban caste-based discrimination**. Amending the City Municipal Code, an ordinance was issued, including caste as a class to be protected against discrimination, alongside race, gender, and religion. Several universities in the U.S., including **Harvard**, Brown and

California State University, have added the caste criteria to its anti-discrimination policies.

Was a new policy required to shield against caste bias?

Defining caste as a “rigid social stratification characterised by hereditary status, endogamy and social barriers sanctioned by custom, law or religion,” the council said discrimination based on caste was occurring in Seattle and that the legislation would prohibit “such caste-based discrimination against individuals.” The fight to address caste discrimination was led by Dalit rights activists and organisations like Equality Labs and other local groups, many of whom originally hailed from India, and yet had felt the long reach of the caste system, rooted in the Manusmriti with its rigid hierarchies, despite being part of the diaspora. While Dalit rights activists called the ordinance, proposed by council member Kshama Sawant, historic, it came under attack from groups like the Hindu American Foundation which said caste discrimination must be condemned but by “singling out South Asians,” the move would put communities like the Hindus under more legal scrutiny.

What does data show?

Thenmozhi Soundararajan, executive director of Equality Labs, told *The Hindu*: “The Equality Labs 2016 Caste in the United States survey found that one in four Dalits in the U.S. had faced verbal or physical assault and two out of every three said they had faced discrimination at work.” The data, she said, are corroborated by hundreds of testimonies of caste-oppressed people who spoke up against discrimination at workplaces, places of worship, and in community relationships. “This is a win centuries in the making, and it sends a message across the world that in order for us to heal from caste we must ban it,” said Ms. Soundararajan. Seattle, in Washington state, home to companies like Microsoft, Amazon and Boeing, have many workers from South Asia, including India. A *Washington Post* report said that Washington state has more than 1,50,000 South Asian residents, many based in the Seattle area.

Have cases of caste discrimination been documented?

According to Ms. Soundararajan, one of the first cases of caste exploitation that came to light in the U.S. happened in 2000 in Berkeley, California. Lakireddy Bali Reddy, who hails from a dominant caste in Andhra Pradesh, was alleged to have trafficked Dalit workers from his native village including minor girls. The police investigated the case and Reddy and his sons were convicted. This was the first case of someone being

convicted for trafficking connected to caste, she said. “There’s also the Cisco case where California’s Department of Fair Employment and Housing sued the tech giant for discriminating against a Dalit engineer based on his caste.”

What is the status in India?

According to the Census (2011), there are an estimated 20 crore Dalits in India. To address the social discrimination that arose out of the practice of untouchability, the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950 was enacted, recognising Hindu Dalits as Scheduled Castes, later amended to include Dalits who had converted to Sikhism and Buddhism. The Supreme Court is hearing a bunch of petitions now seeking inclusion of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims as Scheduled Castes.

Article 15 of the Constitution lays down that no citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them. The Constitution and a host of laws protect against caste discrimination in India, but despite stringent laws and reservation policies providing benefits to the marginalised, caste violence and discrimination continue. In 2021, 50,900 cases of crimes against Scheduled Castes (SCs) were registered, an increase of 1.2% over 2020 (50,291 cases), according to National Crime Records Bureau data. The rate of crime was particularly high in Madhya Pradesh (63.6 per lakh in a SC population of 113.4 lakh) and Rajasthan (61.6 per lakh in a SC population of 112.2 lakh).

Data Point podcast | [Dissecting caste discrimination in Indian universities from admissions to placements: Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#)

Calling the Seattle ordinance a “great achievement,” Suraj Yengde, who documented the everyday humiliations faced by Dalits in his book *Caste Matters*, said, “we need to own up to it and have a sense of shame that such discrimination still occurs. That’s what the Seattle ordinance does, it makes it illegal to tarnish someone in the name of caste.” Ms. Soundararajan, who writes about healing in her new book, *The Trauma of Caste*, said, “We hope that the Seattle ban opens the door for every city and nation to add caste to their non-discrimination policies.”