

US university adds caste to its anti-discrimination policy

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(Condensed from original article - photos and ads removed; link contains original content)

The University of California, Davis, has added caste to its anti-discrimination policy after students said they have seen discrimination take place at the university based on the practice of assigning people their social status at birth.

Under UC Davis' policy, which was amended in September, students or staff who face discrimination or harassment for their perceived castes can now file complaints that could result in formal investigations, the San Francisco Chronicle reported Wednesday.

The Northern California university may be the first public institution to address caste discrimination in the US.

"The significance of adding caste is it ensures that the communities most impacted and most vulnerable to this type of discrimination or harassment know that the university recognises the harm caused," Danesha Nichols, director of UC Davis' Harassment & Discrimination Assistance and Prevention Program, told the newspaper.

Students started pushing for the change after receiving insulting memes in their group chats and overhearing South Asian students ask each other what caste they belonged to before picking roommates, the newspaper reported.

The practice of classification of people by caste has travelled outside of India to Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, and occurs among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Christians and Buddhists, said Anjali Arondekar, a professor and co-director of the Center for South Asian Studies at University of California, Santa Cruz told the newspaper.

“Caste is really about labour segmentation and sustained inequality through the years — millenniums, really,” she said.

India’s caste system places Dalits, once called “untouchables,” at the bottom of its social hierarchy that can determine where they live, what schools they can attend, what jobs they can get and where they marry.

Last year, California regulators sued Cisco Systems, saying an engineer faced discrimination at the company’s Silicon Valley headquarters because he is a Dalit Indian.

The engineer worked on a team at Cisco’s San Jose headquarters with Indians who all immigrated to the US as adults, and all of whom were of high caste, according to the lawsuit filed by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing.

The “higher caste supervisors and co-workers imported the

discriminatory system's practices into their team and Cisco's workplace," the lawsuit said, and that the company did not "substantiate any caste-based or related discrimination or retaliation."

Cisco Systems Inc., a major supplier of computer networking gear that makes the internet work, has said it would defend against the allegations in the complaint.

Caste is often based on a person's last names, the village or town a person comes from, and from their religious and social practices.

Prem Pariyar, a 37-year-old graduate student at California State University, East Bay, said his family would be physically assaulted because of their lower caste in his home country of Nepal. He said the last thing he expected was to face casteism when he moved to the US in 2015.

But he faced it when interacting with other South Asians in the Bay Area — at his restaurant job, at the university, at community events and at dinner parties.

"Some will ask me my last name under the pretense of getting to know me, but are really trying to find out about my caste. Others have served me meals in separate plates and utensils after they find out I'm Dalit," Pariyar said.

He started organising with other CSU students around the issue and their efforts led the Cal State Student Association, which represents all 23 CSU campuses, to recognise caste as a protected category this year. But the CSU school system itself has not made any changes to its discrimination policy. Pariyar was also part of the UC Davis campaign.

UC Davis' policy change feels like a big step for those trying to get caste discrimination recognised across the US.

"It is an issue, it's here and it's time to deal with it," he said.