

Some Hindus question anti-caste policy at Brandeis University

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [November 18, 2020](#) issue



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Last December, when Brandeis University announced a first-of-its-kind policy banning discrimination based on caste, administrators hoped other institutions would follow suit and adopt similar policies of their own.

But nearly a year later, the policy has not caught on. Instead, it's drawing fire from Hindus who say it's fraught with anti-Hindu bias, along with the risk of inept and unfair enforcement.

Though caste-based discrimination goes largely unnoticed in Western societies, South Asian immigrants of low-caste and sub-caste status say they routinely encounter it, according to Dalit activists. Dalits, or “untouchables,” rank lowest in Hinduism’s caste system.

But the Hindu American Foundation, a Washington, DC, advocacy group, is pushing back against what it sees as a “deeply problematic” policy aimed at remedying a largely nonexistent problem.

“In my work with thousands of Hindus and hundreds of Hindu communities throughout the US (predominantly South Asian), caste identity is largely irrelevant in their day-to-day lives and interactions with one another,” said HAF executive director Suhag Shukla in an email. Most US-born, second-generation Hindus wouldn’t even know how to identify someone’s caste, she said.

Because caste is complex and hidden from the naked eye, Shukla said, school administrators with little understanding of its dynamics will be hard-pressed to recognize and adjudicate allegations of caste-based discrimination.

“How will they know what questions to ask to ensure that a complaint perceived as caste discrimination is not the result of something else?” Shukla said. “How will those accused of caste discrimination be guaranteed fairness and due process?”

But the Brandeis administration insists the accused can and will be treated fairly. Allegations of caste bias will be treated no differently than race discrimination, according to Mark Brimhall-Vargas, the chief diversity officer at Brandeis.

“The process is the same,” he said. “The only thing that was changed was we added an identity to our nondiscrimination policy. So it would be processed in the exact same way that any other form of discrimination would be addressed.”

To what degree caste-based discrimination occurs in America is unknown. Anecdotally, those of low caste say it’s common enough to warrant institutional policies like the one at Brandeis, if only to ensure that ideas about caste don’t take hold in the United States.

A former engineering student at a nearby school, requesting anonymity for fear of retribution, said in an interview that his college roommates excluded him from future housing arrangements when they learned of his low-caste status.

At Brandeis, the fight against discrimination is woven into the school's identity. Although the university is nonsectarian, its Jewish founders established the school at a time when Jews were routinely excluded from top-tier institutions of higher education. The new policy simply builds on that tradition of expanding opportunity, according to Brimhall-Vargas.

As a practical matter, however, Brandeis isn't facing a scourge of caste-based discrimination. The school has in past years learned of social ostracism on campus, but it is not aware of serious infractions such as denying someone a job on the basis of caste, Brimhall-Vargas said.

"We want to be sure that we head that off before that ever would become a problem," Brimhall-Vargas said.

Meanwhile, Shukla said her organization's members are concerned that they and their faith are being unfairly tarred with the taint of discriminatory practices.

According to HAF, caste categories evolved as a result of European contact and became a catchall for classifying Hindus; the categories are also a result of colonial racism and religious bigotry, among other factors. Though commonly associated with Hinduism, caste is such a prevalent concept in Indian society that Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians are reported to practice versions of it as well.

"Caste is predominantly conflated with Hindus and Hindu teachings," Shukla said in her email. Trying to enforce a ban on caste-based discrimination runs the risk of "singling out, targeting, and inadvertently discriminating against Hindu students and faculty . . . as presumed perpetrators," Shukla said.

"Our policy applies nondiscrimination protection to people of any caste category," said Brimhall-Vargas in an email. "It does not contain an a priori assumption that someone bears caste animus based on religious identity alone."

HAF says it condemns all forms of caste-based discrimination. However, caste is not an inherently discriminatory concept, according to Shukla.

With caste categorization, she said, "to the extent that different group identities gave communities a means to bring out positive qualities, such as compassion, nurture, service and unity, it had value. To the extent it served to limit, divide, discriminate, or harm others, it didn't. The same holds true today of any community

we belong to or create.”

Eradicating social discrimination needs to happen, she said, as an outgrowth of Hindu teachings. “Social reform has come and should continue to come from the community,” she said.