# **Commit to Inclusion by Recognizing Caste as a Protected Category at Boston University**

We strongly recommend that BU explicitly include **caste** as a protected category in its nondiscrimination and harassment policies to move toward a more inclusive future.

As a public statement concerning diversity and inclusion, it is imperative that BU name and address all forms of systemic exclusion—including caste. We recommend that BU look toward peer institutions such as **Harvard, Brown, Rutgers, Brandeis, and the University of California system**, which have already added caste protections in alignment with their DEI commitments.

In its public [materials and mission](https://www.bu.edu/eoo/equal-opportunity-affirmative-action/policy-and-procedures/#:~:text=Notice%20of%20Nondiscrimination%3A%20Boston%20University,disability%2C%20sexual%20orientation%2C%20gender%20identity), BU reaffirms its values of equity, justice, and belonging. However, without explicit protections against caste-based discrimination, BU risks leaving members of its community—particularly those from South Asian and diasporic communities—vulnerable to harm, exclusion, and silence.

We recommend that BU finalize caste protections by the **end of the 2025–2026 academic year** and launch education and accountability measures immediately thereafter.

**Understanding Caste Discrimination**

Caste is a rigid social hierarchy originating from South Asia, particularly India, which categorizes individuals by birth. Dalits, formerly referred to as "untouchables," occupy the lowest tier and face systemic discrimination. In the U.S., caste has been imported with the South Asian diaspora, leading to cases of discrimination in education and the workplace.

Caste discrimination operates through a combination of social exclusion, occupational segregation, and the denial of dignity, opportunities, and resources. It often manifests subtly—such as assumptions about someone's background, coded language in conversations, or systematic barriers to access. In academic spaces, caste-based bias can show up in who is included in research opportunities, student organizations, or even informal peer networks.

In many cases, the caste-oppressed go to great lengths to hide their caste, hoping to avoid stigma, ostracization, or missed opportunities. Journalist and activist Yashica Dutt has written powerfully about "passing as upper caste" in her memoir [Coming Out as Dalit](https://www.beacon.org/Coming-Out-as-Dalit-P2035.aspx). Her story illustrates the mental and emotional toll of living in secrecy. Common expressions of caste bias in the U.S. include social shunning, slurs, and denial of access to housing or jobs.

[Examples](https://www.equalitylabs.org/caste-survey-2018) of caste discrimination in university settings include social exclusion, coded language in roommate searches (such as "pure veg"), questioning of qualifications due to caste background, and unequal treatment in housing, student groups, or promotion decisions. Such bias may be subtle but has a profound impact on the affected individuals’ sense of belonging and access to opportunity.

**“Why Caste Protections Are Necessary”**

The South Asian American population currently exceeds six million, with Indian Americans comprising around five million of that number—and the community continues to [grow](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2022.B02018?q=B02018). Scholar Sangay Mishra highlights that caste awareness not only persists but is actively reproduced within the [Indian diaspora](https://theconversation.com/caste-doesnt-just-exist-in-india-or-in-hinduism-it-is-pervasive-across-many-religions-in-south-asia-and-the-diaspora-180470).

Caste-based discrimination is evident in the **US institutions**. In 2018, a survey by

[Equality Labs](https://www.equalitylabs.org/what-is-caste/) (non-profit organization) found that 1 in 4 Dalit (stigmatized caste identity)

Americans experienced verbal or physical assault because of their caste, and 1 in 3 Dalit students reported experiencing discrimination during their education. Furthermore, 41 percent of Dalit students surveyed reported facing discrimination and microaggressions in US educational

institutions as well as in the greater South Asian diaspora. Casteism in the US has been

documented by several reputable sources including [NPR](https://www.npr.org/2020/10/14/923736245/caste-arrives-in-silicon-valley), [The Atlantic](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/india-america-caste/620583/), [Al Jazeera](https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/12/15/it-is-time-to-talk-about-caste-in-pakistan-and-pakistani-diaspora) and [Carnegie Endowment](https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/06/social-realities-of-indian-americans-results-from-the-2020-indian-american-attitudes-survey?lang=en) for International Peace. This overwhelming body of evidence cannot be overlooked in good faith. In 2020, Isabel Wilkerson in her national bestseller book, Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents, highlights the need to make the fight against casteism a salient issue ininstitutional policies.

Dalit Americans have been leaders in pushing back against caste-based discrimination within the United States, and they, too, see their struggle as shared by those oppressed in other caste systems. For example, in 2023, the City of Fresno in California passed a ban on caste-based discrimination following the joint efforts of Sikhs of the Ravidassia community and Oaxacans.

**Questrom’s Caste Workshop**

In a recent Questrom School of Business workshop, students and faculty gathered to discuss caste, gender, and social justice. Feedback from participants highlighted how little was known about caste and how valuable the learning space was. One participant noted the clarity between class and caste and how caste systems limit upward mobility. Others expressed surprise at the intersectional oppression faced by Dalit women. Multiple attendees expressed that the event was their first opportunity to engage meaningfully with the topic.

Key reflections included:

"I didn’t know the history or how modern casteism continues. This was eye-opening."

"Understanding the difference between caste and class helped me unpack my own privilege."

"Just having the space to learn about this was valuable in and of itself."

The depth of reflection demonstrates a need for further institutional recognition and education on caste issues.

**Why BU Needs to Act:** Caste discrimination is not explicitly addressed under current U.S. laws or BU’s anti-discrimination policy. Cases like the Cisco lawsuit, where a Dalit employee faced caste discrimination without company recourse, show the limitations of relying on generalized categories such as race or religion. Without naming caste, victims are less likely to report incidents, and administrators lack the guidance to intervene.

Recognizing caste is not only policy—it’s about making people feel seen, safe, and respected.

**Peer Institution Precedents:**

* **Harvard University** added caste protections through a graduate union contract and extended it university-wide.
* **Brandeis University** was the first U.S. higher education institution to formally recognize caste in its nondiscrimination policy, setting a national precedent as early as 2019.
* **UMass Amherst** lists caste in its non-discrimination policy and began collecting caste-related data.
* **California State University (CSU)** included caste across all 23 campuses and won a legal challenge supporting the change.
* **Rutgers University** formed a task force and issued a report advocating for caste inclusion.

BU’s peers are acknowledging caste to ensure equity and protect community members. BU risks falling behind unless similar action is taken.

**Legal and Social Momentum:** Municipalities such as Seattle and Fresno have banned caste discrimination. A federal court upheld CSU’s caste protections, dismissing claims that it violated constitutional rights. Additionally, caste-based harm is recognized by the UN as a human rights issue. These developments show growing momentum and legal clarity for caste protections.

**Recommendations:**

1. **Update BU’s policy** to include caste explicitly in anti-discrimination statements.
2. **Provide education and training** for faculty, staff, and students.
3. **Establish support systems** for caste-oppressed individuals.
4. **Include caste in climate surveys** to assess community needs.
5. **Continue hosting dialogues and workshops** to foster understanding.

**Conclusion:** BU has an opportunity to lead by example. Recognizing caste as a protected category aligns with the university’s values and the broader movement for justice. Students, staff, and faculty deserve to be protected against all forms of discrimination, including caste. By making this change, BU can reinforce its commitment to inclusion and stand in solidarity with caste-oppressed individuals in our community and beyond.