March .....

To

Members of the Board

Massachusetts Society of Professors

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Dear Colleagues,

Greetings to you all, and I hope this mail finds you well. I am writing to call for a discussion on the issue of caste discrimination in U.S. universities and workplaces and for the union to pass a resolution to add caste to the anti-discrimination policy of the union (and the University). In May 2018, several of us at UMass Amherst organized an international conference on *Caste and Race: Reconfiguring Solidarities* that highlighted how caste and casteism travels across borders. Isabel Wilkerson, keynote speaker at the conference and author of the national bestseller *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* has presented eloquently on the strong parallels albeit distinctiveness between race and racism and India's caste system. The conference and Wilkerson’s book have been generative and underscore the need to make caste salient in institutional policies.

In the last couple of years, mainstream media have brought to light caste discrimination in the United States, especially in Silicon Valley tech companies. Most Indian diaspora in academic and professional contexts, including myself, are from privileged upper-caste groups. It has created a context in which casteism and discrimination against fellow Indians from Dalit and other marginalized castes exists as a silent scourge that is difficult to challenge. In June 2020, the first ever [lawsuit](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/14/opinion/caste-cisco-indian-americans-discrimination.html) on caste discrimination was filed in California against the tech giant Cisco. The Cisco case has brought needed attention to caste discrimination in the workplace, following which 30 Dalit women engineers published a [statement](https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/a-statement-on-caste-bias-in-silicon-valley-from-30-dalit-women-engineers/d692b4f8-2710-41c3-9d5f-ea55c13bcc50/?itid=lk_readmore_manual_16) about their experience in the Washington Post. I believe this is just the tip of the iceberg and shows that caste stigma continues to haunt people from lower and untouchable castes even after migration to the North. As the testimonies attest, Dalit professionals face discrimination and social isolation from within the South Asian community. Indian upper castes represent their caste through their last name and quickly identify and isolate people from lower caste backgrounds. In some cases, lower castes have faced physical violence too, especially in instances of [inter-caste marriages](https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/02/us/02cnd-honor.html) termed as "honor killings." Universities are not immune to the problem of casteism and are also spaces where caste discrimination and stigma are prevalent.

While the reality of discrimination and bias against BIPOC faculty, staff and students is recognized in policy and legal statutes, caste discrimination in the university remains unacknowledged. As a BIPOC immigrant faculty, I have faced racism in my department and College, and was fortunate to have the support of the MSP to defend my right to fair treatment in the workplace. I am painfully aware that Dalit students, post-doctoral fellows and faculty on campus that experience discrimination and humiliation do not have recourse to similar legal and institutional support. While I am able to rely on the support of the BIPOC community, Dalits’ face discrimination from within the BIPOC community. Inattention to caste seriously hinders recruitment and support of Dalit and lower caste members in higher education, and significantly diminishes the university’s commitment to inclusion of historically excluded groups. I therefore request the MSP to pass a resolution to include caste in its non-discrimination policy and work with the university administration to make it a protected category in human and civil rights law and equal employment laws like gender, sexuality, race, and disability. So far [Brandeis University](https://www.brandeis.edu/human-resources/policies/discrimination/caste-statement.html) is the only university in the United States to recognize and include caste discrimination in its non-discrimination policy. I am optimistic that UMass Amherst will rise to the occasion and set a historic precedent as the first public university in the country to add caste in its non-discrimination policy. I hope the Board will take up the matter and lead on this important issue.

I appreciate your time and consideration on the matter and look forward to working with you to bring about a successful resolution.

In solidarity,

Relevant links on caste discrimination in North America

* <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/12/20/university-adds-caste-nondiscrimination-policy>
* <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-03-08/caste-discrimination-exists-college-campuses-some-schools-are-trying-change>
* <https://www.insightintodiversity.com/brandeis-becomes-first-us-university-to-ban-caste-based-discrimination/>
* <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/13/new-lawsuit-shines-light-caste-discrimination-us-around-world/>
* <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/14/opinion/caste-cisco-indian-americans-discrimination.html>
* <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/10/27/indian-caste-bias-silicon-valley/>