

### University Statement on the Posting of this Report

Rutgers stands firmly against discrimination of all types. During our last union contract negotiation, the University agreed with the Rutgers AAUP-AFT to form a joint Task Force to examine issues of potential caste discrimination impacting students and union members, best practices to respond to caste-based discrimination, and whether to include “caste” as a protected category within its Policy on Discrimination and Harassment. The report produced by the co-chairs, which contains the recommendations agreed to by the majority of the Task Force, is posted here, consistent with the requirements of the agreement with the AAUP-AFT.

**The posting of this report does not reflect the University’s agreement with, or adoption of, the findings and conclusions set forth in the report. As it does with all task forces, the university will review and assess the recommendations in the report.**



REPORT  
**2024**

# **Caste-Based Discrimination in U.S. Higher Education and at Rutgers**

Published August 2024

Caste-based discrimination is a problem at Rutgers that limits the potential and opportunities of some in our university community...This report demonstrates the need for our proposed changes to Rutgers policies and actions regarding caste.”

## | CASTE TASK FORCE

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University Task Force on Caste Discrimination, Rutgers University

The Task Force was co-chaired by Corinne Castro, Senior Director for Faculty Diversity and Institutional Transformation within Rutgers University Equity and Inclusion Office, and Audrey Truschke, Professor of History at Rutgers University-Newark. The Task Force included Jeffrey Immanuel, Fahima Mohideen, Novneet Sahu, Anand Sarwate, and representatives of the Office of General Counsel, University Human Resources, and Student Affairs.

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# Executive Summary

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Caste-based discrimination is a problem at Rutgers that limits the potential and opportunities of some in our university community. This situation is inconsistent with Rutgers commitment to equity and inclusion. The University Task Force on Caste Discrimination found that existing policies are insufficient to address caste on campus.\* Accordingly, we make four key recommendations in this report:

- 1** Rutgers should add caste as a protected category to its nondiscrimination policy.
- 2** Rutgers should advertise its current policy and future changes to all university community members.
- 3** Wide-ranging educational opportunities are needed to create awareness and change regarding caste.
- 4** Rutgers should collect further data on caste-based discrimination on campus.

This report demonstrates the need for our proposed changes to Rutgers policies and actions regarding caste in several major sections. It also outlines the likely impacts on members of the Rutgers community of enacting these recommendations and the consequences of allowing caste-based discrimination to flourish unchecked.

\*The committee's full name is "University Task Force on Caste Discrimination"; we refer to it as "Task Force" throughout this report. "We" statements reflect the majority view of the Task Force, not the views of every contributing member.

## Defining Caste

define “caste” as an inherited and immutable social hierarchy that exists in many communities worldwide. As noted in section 1, most Americans are either unfamiliar with the category of caste entirely or only aware of the specific caste system into which they were born. In contrast, we present caste as a global phenomenon with many discrete incarnations, especially emphasizing its presence in American social life. We also underscore the importance of naming caste, thereby breaking the taboo surrounding this pernicious social hierarchy and associated discrimination.

## Report Sections

Section 2 outlines the robust harms of caste-based discrimination. When surveying caste in America, we find a sharp contrast between personal experiences versus legal reporting and news reporting. Legal reports of caste-based discrimination are miniscule to non-existent, and many places, such as the State of New Jersey, do not even collect data on caste as a bias motivation. In contrast, civil rights groups report extensive caste-based discrimination, and high-profile cases attest to extreme cases of caste-based discrimination in our state, such as forced labor. The Task Force also collected stories of caste-based discrimination from Rutgers faculty and students, and we publish those testimonies within this section. These stories attest to the negative impacts of caste at Rutgers but are anecdotal, not representative sample data. This limitation partly fuels our recommendation that Rutgers spearhead more systematic collection of data on caste-based discrimination on campus.

Rutgers would follow more than a dozen institutions of higher education—including several large public universities—in specifying that caste-based discrimination is not tolerated on campus. We survey policy changes at other universities in section 3, pointing out lessons for the Rutgers administration as it implements the Task Force’s recommendations. Sections 3 and 4 also outline the few laws in the United States regarding caste-based discrimination as well as legal challenges to those laws and to unchecked caste-based discrimination.

The fifth and final section of this report details a series of educational opportunities that Rutgers can pursue to educate all members of the university community about caste-based discrimination on campus and Rutgers policies thereon. The recommended steps are divided by length of time, with several achievable in less than 6 months. Other recommendations are long-term goals requiring several years to fully implement. Rutgers stands to be a leader—in the Big Ten and among other peer institutions—in forging and implementing a robust set of programs designed to educate around and combat caste-based discrimination.

Addressing caste on campus is both simple and complicated. The easy part is clarifying Rutgers policies such that all members of the university community know that caste-based discrimination is unacceptable. More difficult is providing clear education about what “caste” is and how it works, issues we even faced internally as a Task Force. Our hope is that this report offers a roadmap for cultivating caste equity and education on campus. We look forward to working with the Rutgers administration to implement our recommendations.

# Introduction

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## Situating the Task Force

Rutgers has a strong commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, as evidenced by the 2022 Diversity Strategic Plan and 2023 Progress reports and Summit.[1] During the 2023 labor union negotiations, caste was addressed as a labor issue. As a result (see “Side Letter” below for exact language), the Task force was created as part of the negotiated contract to:

1. Examine issues of caste discrimination impacting students and members of negotiations units.
2. Examine the inclusion of “caste” as a protected category in the University’s policies on prohibited discrimination and harassment.
3. Identify best practices to address caste discrimination.

The Task Force was further tasked to communicate its findings in a report that captures its deliberations, including points of consensus and/or disagreement. Accordingly, we include considerable detail in this report and specific recommendations.

In the second half of 2023, the committee’s co-chairs were appointed: Corinne Castro was approved to serve as the Senior Vice President for Equity Designee and Audrey Truschke was appointed as the Rutgers AAUP-AFT Faculty and Graduate Student Union Designee. University Human Resources and Office of General Counsel appointees were confirmed as well as an additional union representative. The remaining four members representing non-aligned faculty, staff, and students were identified and recruited by early spring 2024 semester. The goal was to have diverse voices from multiple stakeholder groups represented on the Task Force.



## **Side Letter on Caste Discrimination (approved in union negotiations in Spring 2023)**

WHEREAS, major public and private universities around the United States have included caste as a protected classification in their non-discrimination policies; and

WHEREAS, the Union has requested to add “caste” as a protected category to the non-discrimination article in the parties’ collective negotiations agreement;

THEREFORE, the Union and the University agree as follows:

1. The Union agrees to participate on a Task Force on the inclusion of caste as a protected category in the University’s anti-discrimination policies, based on the following description and mission of the Task Force:

Following the conclusion of negotiations, the University agrees to establish a Task Force to examine issues of caste discrimination impacting students and members of negotiations units and the inclusion of “caste” as a protected category in the University’s policies on prohibited discrimination and harassment and best practices to address caste discrimination. The task force will be co-chaired by the SVP for Equity, or designee, and a faculty member designated by the AAUP-AFT. In addition to faculty, staff, and student representation, the Task Force also will include representatives from University Human Resources and the University’s Office of the Senior Vice President and General Counsel. In addition to the co-chair designated by the AAUP-AFT, the Union may designate another faculty member to serve on the Task Force with respect to the impact of adding caste as a protected category to the employment-related policies on prohibited discrimination and harassment that apply to negotiations unit members. In the event that the University adds caste as a protected category to its anti-discrimination policies, caste shall also be added as a protected category to Article 4 of the AAUP-AFT collective negotiations agreement.

2. In its deliberations about whether to add caste as a protected category to the University's anti-discrimination policies and collective negotiations agreements, the Task Force will consider other instances in which discrimination based on caste has been prohibited, including but not limited to, statutes, policies and collective bargaining agreements.

3. The Task Force shall issue a report, which shall be posted on the University's website.

4. The University acknowledges that negotiations unit members who are alleged victims of caste discrimination related to their employment, currently may file a grievance under Article 9 alleging a violation of Article 4 under other existing protections, including, but not limited to ancestry, national origin, race, and gender. In addition, negotiations unit members who allege that they are victims of harassment based on caste may file a grievance alleging harassment under Section a.2 in Article 9.

# Key Recommendations

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The committee makes four key recommendations to the Rutgers University administration regarding combatting caste-based discrimination on campus. The first recommendation was supported by three-quarters of the committee present (i.e., 75% voting in favor; 8 out of 9 committee members were present at the vote), and recommendations 2–4 were supported unanimously by those present.

- 1** Rutgers should add caste as a protected category to its nondiscrimination policy.
- 2** Rutgers should advertise its current policy and future changes to all university community members.
- 3** Wide-ranging educational opportunities are needed to create awareness and change regarding caste.
- 4** Rutgers should collect further data on caste-based discrimination on campus.

# Section 1: Defining Caste

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Caste denotes an inherited and immutable social hierarchy with uneven power relations between groups. Within the many caste systems that exist worldwide, individuals generally have differential access to resources, prestige, and power that accord with their place within the hierarchy. Those at the bottom—sometimes known as “untouchables”—are most at risk of discrimination and other harms owing to their caste.[1]

Many Americans lack awareness of caste as a type of social stratification, and so this section unpacks the category of “caste,” focusing on its social dimensions and modes of operation. Our efforts here do not attempt to definitively delineate caste for purposes of Rutgers University Policy. Rutgers generally does not define its protected categories and instead merely lists them in terms ranging from those commonly understood (e.g., “race” and “age”) to those that rely on more specialized language (e.g., “atypical hereditary cellular or blood trait”).[2] Still, outlining key dimensions of caste is essential to educating the Rutgers community and combating caste-based discrimination on and off campus.

## Caste as a Global and an American Category

Many societies have caste systems, and scholars have long used the category of caste (derived from the Portuguese *casta*) comparatively. For example, more than seventy years ago, Arthur Hocart’s *Caste: A Comparative Study* (1950) compared how discrete caste systems manifest in India, Persia, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Rotuma (a Polynesian island), ancient Rome and Greece, and Egypt.

In recent years, scholars, journalists, and activists have discussed and analyzed caste hierarchies—using that language—among Japanese,[3] Mexican,[4] Igbo (a Nigerian-origin ethnic group),[5] Somali,[6] Yemeni,[7] and other communities. Many of these communities have diasporas that reside in the United States, and so their discrete caste systems are transnational as well as integrated within the American social fabric.

Of the many caste systems in contemporary American life, the Indian or South Asian caste system is perhaps the most well-known owing to population size and scholarly attention. There are more than six million South Asian Americans at present (about five million are Indian American), and this diaspora population continues to grow.[8] India is the most populous nation on earth and has a growing population. Nonetheless, as Suraj Yengde—a scholar of caste—explained in 2022, “Caste as a hereditary system is not unique to India, it is global. The inflexible forms of hierarchies do exist elsewhere.”[9] Nonetheless, he goes on to note, “But [other caste systems] have not received the same intellectual response as is seen with [sic] Indian caste system.”[10] This holds true in the American diaspora. Sangay Mishra, a leading scholar of the South Asian American diaspora, has drawn attention to how “the Indian diasporic community carries, and indeed replicates, caste consciousness.”[11]

“Dalit” (meaning “oppressed”) is the preferred term for “untouchables” in the Indian caste system. 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.  
[12]

Caste hierarchies operate distinctly from other kinds of discrimination and often occur within communities of the same ethnicity, race, and culture. For example, Anthony Obinna, a Catholic archbishop in Nigeria, describes the caste divide in Igbo society as follows: “In some ways it is even worse than the black-white divide in America. We speak the same language, eat the same food. There is no facial or cultural difference—but this is happening.”[13] One’s place in a caste hierarchy is typically not apparent based on one’s appearance or dress. This adds a layer of difficulty for those outside of a particular caste system to see discrimination therein, since outsiders often lack the cultural competency to even distinguish between caste groups.

Additionally, the caste-oppressed often go to great lengths to try to hide their caste, in the hopes of avoiding social stigma, ostracization, or lost opportunities. The journalist and activist Yashica Dutt has written about attempting to “to pass as upper caste” in her memoir *Coming out as Dalit* (2024).[14] Similarly, Siddhant, a Meta employee in California, attested in 2022 that he hides his caste out of fear of social shame and facing negative consequences at work.[15] Echoing these concerns on campus, a Dalit student at Rutgers wrote in 2021:

Every single Punjabi or Indian I meet they somehow ask you what caste you belong to. I try my best to hide it. Either I say “I don’t know” or I just try to say something else. It’s not just older people but people of my age are the same. My family always told me it’s better not to tell people what caste I belong to. I always feel afraid to tell this to Indians because every time they find this out, they started treating me differently.[16]

One can hide one’s caste at times, although this rarely works forever. Passing as upper caste can often prompt exposure to casteist remarks about others in one’s community, as attested by a Dalit university student in either New York or New Jersey interviewed in May 2007.[17] Ultimately, there is no escape from caste since it constitutes an inherited identity within a socially enforced system.

## How Caste Systems are Enforced and Perpetuated

All caste systems share certain major features while diverging in other ways. Capturing some of the major recurrent features, a 2023 Seattle law that outlaws caste-based discrimination defines caste as a “system of rigid social stratification characterized by hereditary status, endogamy, and social barriers.”[18] There are many alternative definitions of caste, but all highlight that caste limits social access for some groups and perpetuates via endogamy (restricting marriage to within one’s caste group). Professor Suraj Yengde offers a more elaborate list of the features often present in caste systems:[19]

- Granting of social rank from the mother’s womb.
- Discrimination premised on purity and pollution.
- Enforced endogamy.
- Occupational ranking in society.
- Contest to the hierarchal sanctity.
- Stigma and shame to discuss the issue of caste.
- Communal ostracization.
- Inferiority granted to certain social groups based on their birth.
- Ignorance from the government and the society.
- Justification for the existence of the system.
- Calling names to designate the status of the “lower” Other in the society.
- Used in reference to or instead of racial theory.
- Banned from positions of higher status in politics and society.

Practically, these features of caste systems mean that the oppressed may well face a rash of issues in contemporary American university life. These include limited access to resources, such as denial of housing because upper caste roommates do not wish to be made impure by the presence of a caste-oppressed person. Social shunning and slurs are common. All of these examples are attested in recent years on Rutgers campuses.[20]

Additionally, students at other universities have documented harassment and doxing as well as discrimination by upper-caste professors. For example, in a story recounted in 2019, a Ph.D. student was denied a position by a lab director at the University of Alabama who screened applicants based on caste.[21]

The harms of caste can be felt for generations, even in diasporas, and this lends insight into the operation of caste. In some cases, diasporic individuals are no longer aware of their place in the caste system but still face caste-based discrimination (or, alternatively, caste privilege) when caste divisions are enforced in social contexts. One example is the Mehmi family. In 1906, Maihya Ram Mehmi migrated to Vancouver Island, thus becoming the first Indian Dalit to emigrate to Canada.[22] Decades later, one of his great-granddaughters, Anita Lal, was mistaken as Brahmin, which prompted her to ask senior family members about the family's place in the South Asian caste hierarchy. Ms. Lal's grandmother advised her to forget about caste, but Ms. Lal began to observe caste-based discrimination against her younger cousins and relatives (all of whom were Dalit, like her), including bullying in school, canceled marriages, and social ostracization. When recounting these events in 2022, Lal told an interviewer: "We need to start actually talking about [caste] because caste does matter...I saw that it was affecting the generations after me as well." [23]

## Talking About Caste

One enduring feature of caste-based discrimination in many communities is a stigma against discussing it. To date, this social taboo has dissuaded formal reporting of caste-based discrimination on many American college campuses, including at Rutgers.[24] In contrast, members of lower caste communities often identify open, frank discussions of caste to be "hugely important" to their communities.[25] In publishing this report and this section defining caste, we\* seek—among other goals—to begin to break the stigma of talking about caste and caste-based discrimination.

\*"We" statements for the entire report reflect the majority view of the Task Force, not the views of every contributing member.



## Section 2: Harms of Caste-Based Discrimination

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In the previous section of this report we have seen how caste-based discrimination is experienced by many communities globally and within the United States, including in institutions of higher education. Likewise, the harms of caste-based discrimination are far-reaching. Discrimination against one group can harm caste-oppressed people from other communities as well as the collective. That being said, most documented examples of the harms of caste-based discrimination and the lack of protections against them come from South Asian communities (see section 1 for a discussion of the reasons for this). Drawing on research and attestations from Rutgers community members, we describe the concrete harms of caste-based discrimination in this section and provide case studies and testimonials.

The most comprehensive study of the harms stemming from caste-based discrimination in the United States come from a 2016 report by civil rights group Equality Labs that focused explicitly on the South Asian caste system among the American diaspora. They surveyed 1,200 people, more than 40% of whom belong to lower caste backgrounds, in the United States.[1] This was an unusual study in focusing on caste-oppressed members of the South Asian American diaspora. As scholars Shweta Majumdar Adur and Anjana Narayan noted in 2017: “Dalits’ lives are rarely at the center of discussions of South Asian diaspora, and the dearth of scholarship on Dalit lives and activism in the U.S. is a testament to that marginalization.”[2] They describe Dalits as “a diaspora within a diaspora” that suffer from caste-based discrimination.[3] Indeed, most Dalit Americans surveyed by Equality Labs reported experiencing fears and harms related to casteism, including more than 40% who reported caste-based discrimination in educational contexts (including colleges).[4]

We highlight the following features of their experiences as relevant to the Rutgers community:

1. Shame and fear around their caste being “outed”
2. Being ostracized in educational settings (as students), especially by peers
3. Poor treatment and opportunities in the workplace (as employees and coworkers)
4. Being denied service in local businesses or places of worship
5. Discrimination in interpersonal relationships
6. Verbal and physical attacks

Individual accounts, too, highlight the “trauma of caste” experienced by Dalit Americans, with many attesting anonymously to their experiences of casteism but being unwilling to be publicly identified.[5]

Institutions of higher education such as Rutgers are complex and made up of a range of interconnected entities: students, staff and faculty employees, student organizations, religious and other social organizations, on-campus businesses, and housing, to name a few. Examples of situations that caste-oppressed individuals may face in university settings include:

1. During an educational activity, students may be pressured to disclose information about themselves that allows peers to infer their caste.
2. An undergraduate or graduate student may be made to feel unwelcome in a dormitory or in an officially recognized student group.
3. A staff member may be denied a promotion.
4. At an on-campus but non-Rutgers dining establishment, a student may be denied service or have their order delayed in preference to a student with a higher caste status.

5. In a post on a graduate student forum looking for roommates for student housing, a student may state that they are looking for a roommate who is “pure veg”, lightly coded language in certain caste systems that suggests that only students with an upper caste-identity are welcome.

6. Faculty search committee members may suggest that the accomplishments of a lower caste applicant should be discounted because they benefitted from affirmative action policies in their nation of origin.[6]

In specific circumstances, all of these harms can also occur on the basis of other protected categories, such as race, religion, and national origin. At times, caste intersects with these and other protected categories, whereas, at other times, caste-based discrimination persists independently. Even in an intersectional situation, where multiple categories and identities are at play, it is critical to recognize the unique function of caste and caste-based discrimination in order to fully conceptualize the harms to oppressed individuals. The case studies included at the end of this section help illustrate these complexities.

## **Caste-based discrimination in the absence of regulation**

As of the time of writing (spring 2024), New Jersey has no laws specifically prohibiting caste-based discrimination. When there is no formal protection against certain forms of discrimination, the discrimination can be more overt. Consider the following story from the University of Alabama (Alabama also lacks laws against caste-based discrimination). A professor initially admitted a graduate student to their program and lab but rescinded the offer upon discovering that the student was of lower caste.[7] In the news article about the case, Kevin Brown, a Professor of Law at Indiana University, noted that “[t]he United States doesn’t recognize the concept of caste, so it’s not included in any of our laws that prohibit discrimination... there are very little protections for Dalits in the United States...”[8]

In New Jersey, data about caste discrimination is limited owing to the lack of legal protections. New Jersey State Police do not consider caste a cause of bias incidents, and other categories offer no hint if caste bias motivated the crime in question. For example, in 2023, there were 136 “Anti-Asian” incidents, 121 “Anti-Other Race/Ethnicity/Ancestry” occurrences, and bias incidents against multiple religious groups that practice caste in some contexts (including Christians, Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, and Jews)[9]; some of these cases may have involved caste-based discrimination, but there is no way to know.[10] The New Jersey Office of the Attorney General’s Division on Civil Rights, which investigates and prosecutes discrimination complaints, also does not specifically track caste-related claims. Neither does the New Jersey Civil Service Commission, which investigates discrimination claims by state employees.

Even without official statistics, we know that caste-based discrimination negatively impacts the lives of New Jersey residents. In 2021, the FBI raided a temple in Robbinsville, New Jersey that was accused of using Dalit forced labor and found low-caste men being “made to work grueling hours under often dangerous conditions,” while their bosses paid them illegally low wages and withheld their passports.[11] The FBI later expanded their investigation of caste-based labor trafficking within BAPS, the denomination that ran the Robbinsville temple, to five states.[12] The Robbinsville temple formally opened in October 2023, and the case fueled calls to ban caste-based discrimination in New Jersey.[13]

Moreover, the “Testimonies on Casteism and Caste-based Discrimination”—collected by this Task Force and printed in full in this section—attest that caste is part of university life at multiple Rutgers campuses. The testimonies identify caste as operating in social contexts, in the classroom, and even limiting the availability of housing. In one testimony, a Dalit student speaks of hiding her low caste status repeatedly when interacting with others from her community as she seeks to escape ostracization. Such cases are not born out in available Rutgers reporting data, which is a cause for concern.

At Rutgers, the Office of Employment Equity (OEE) enforces the Policy Prohibiting Discrimination and Harassment, 60.1.12, which this Task Force recommends be expanded to include caste as a protected category. A review of OEE’s records showed no complaints that pertained to caste specifically. This absence of data is inconsistent with the “Testimonies about Casteism and Caste-Based Discrimination at Rutgers.” This underscores the report’s recommendations to enhance Rutgers policies against caste-based discrimination and provide education to all members of the Rutgers community on the harms of casteism.

## **Testimonies about Casteism and Caste-Based Discrimination at Rutgers**

*These testimonies feature individual cases where caste prejudices and caste-based discrimination negatively impacted members of the Rutgers community. They were collected and anonymized by a member of the Task Force and include the experiences of undergraduate students, graduate students, and professors. The Task Force lacked the ability to conduct a systematic study of caste on campus, and we present these testimonies as anecdotal, not statistical, data. The limits of the Task Force’s ability to collect systemic information inspired our recommendation that the Rutgers administration more formally instigate data collection about how caste shapes and informs experiences at Rutgers University. Even given the limits of the testimonies collected here, they attest to the presence of caste-based discrimination at Rutgers and its detrimental effects on many aspects of university life.*

## **I can't marry a Dalit...**

In class discussion, a student stated that they were Brahmin and that their parents would never let them marry a Dalit. The Brahmin student had challenged his parents, asking: “What if I loved her? What if she had a successful career? What if she was rich?” The parents answered no, no, and no. As the professor, I wondered -- How did hearing this story make another student in the class feel who had previously disclosed to me, in private, that they were Dalit? Did it constitute a hostile environment? Should I say something? If a white student had gone on about how their parents would never let them marry a black person, I would intervene. But we have no explicit protections against caste-based discrimination at Rutgers, and so I said nothing. I felt powerless to educate my students about the harms of casteism, even as I witnessed exclusion in a Rutgers classroom.

- Professor at Rutgers, 2020s

## **No lower-caste roommates allowed...**

I responded to a Facebook ad that was looking for a roommate in a grad student shared house. After speaking with the landlord and agreeing upon a move-in date, I spoke to the flatmate with whom I would potentially share the house. Just as we were wrapping up, he mentioned, “hey, by the way, this is a vegetarian household – I’m sure you know it but just wanted to mention.” I told him that I eat meat, fish, and eggs and mentioned how the landlord never mentioned anything to that effect. He clarified that the landlord doesn’t enforce it, but it is a practice that they have maintained among flatmates. He then said that if I were to bring back non-veg food home, then I can only eat it in my own room, and not in any of the common areas, such as the kitchen or dining area. I was not allowed to heat-up non-veg food in the shared kitchen. “You’re Indian, you understand na,” he said. I called the landlord to inform her what had just happened.

She was horrified to learn this had been the practice. And she told me that she would not stand for any such discrimination and that she would ask the said flatmate to leave the house at the end of the lease which was coming up soon. I was so relieved and glad to receive such support. Only for her to call me back the next day to tell me that she has spoken to the flatmates and decided that she cannot interfere in the personal habits of anyone.

I really wanted to explore legal avenues, but none existed. Rutgers has no clear mechanism to raise a complaint of caste-based discrimination. This is not the first time this has happened to me. I have been denied housing because I eat meat or I was a single woman so many countless times, but that was all in India. It is terrifying and suffocating to think that I can move across continents and oceans and still be subject to the same patterns of discrimination, take all the mental and health toll that such discrimination heaps on me, and still be expected to compete and perform on the same footing as everyone else.

- Graduate student at Rutgers, 2020s

### **Don't tell people your caste or they'll treat you differently...**

When I moved to the United States I thought I was free here. No more discrimination. Every single Punjabi or Indian I meet they somehow ask you what caste you belong to. I try my best to hide it. Either I say "I don't know" or I just try to say something else. It's not just older people but people of my age are the same. My family always told me it's better not to tell people what caste I belong to. I always feel afraid to tell this to Indians because every time they find this out, they started treating me differently.

- Undergraduate student at Rutgers who identifies as Chamar, a Dalit caste, 2020s

## **Go eat with your Patel brothers...**

It was busy as hell in the Livi dining hall tonight, and I couldn't find a seat for a solid 10 minutes. Finally I saw a group of 6-7 people get up from one of those 6 seat tables in the middle of the hall, so I took a chair and left my backpack and jacket on it. I came back with food and there was another dude on the opposite edge. No big deal. Not 30 seconds after I started eating, the original 6 people came back and asked for the table back. We argued back and forth a bit like it was high school. But then this one person of the six said: "Why don't y'all go find some of your Patel brothers and eat with them before we move you out of our table." That's a level of racism I never expected from anyone at Rutgers, at least in a public setting.

*\*This story was shared on Reddit. One responding comment from another Rutgers community member noted: "Our DEI policies do not currently recognize caste discrimination as many other universities do. The AAUP faculty contract negotiations are trying to address it."*

- Undergraduate student at Rutgers, 2020s

## **Whose children are you...**

We were at a protest regarding new anti-Muslim laws in India, held on the Rutgers-New Brunswick campus. There was also a counterprotest, led by those who supported the laws, and someone yelled something in Hindi. It was years ago now, but I recall something like "aap kinke (or kiske) aulad ho" (whose children are you?). I took it as a casteist remark, likely directed at some students standing nearby.

- Professor at Rutgers, 2020s



# Section 3: Caste as a Protected Category

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An important initial question regarding how caste can fit into the protected categories explicitly named in Rutgers Policy 60.1.12 is whether it is already adequately covered by the existing categories. Other universities have faced comparable questions, and we survey their responses here as informative for our own deliberations as a Task Force and for Rutgers in considering our recommendations.

Several universities in the United States have included protections against caste-based discrimination in their policies since 2019, typically via an amendment or interpretive guidance to their existing nondiscrimination policies. We identified fourteen United States institutions of higher education or university systems—totalling more than forty campuses—that have explicitly enacted policies against caste-based discrimination in recent years. After synthesizing this data, we observed the following key points about adding caste as a protected category:

- Eight higher education institutions (or systems thereof) were private colleges or universities and six were public universities (including two systems that each cover multiple campuses). Therefore, Rutgers has strong precedents to address caste on campus as an institution of higher education and as a public university.
- Eight colleges or universities added caste as a new protected class, and six added it as a subset of an existing protected class or classes.[1] Of the private schools, seven of the eight added caste as a new protected class (Georgetown was the exception), whereas five out of six public schools added caste as a subset of existing protected classes or as a combination of existing classes (University of Massachusetts Amherst was the exception).

- The California State University system—the largest public university system in the U.S. with a few dozen campuses—and the University of California system—comprising ten campuses—are among the public institutions that have added caste to their nondiscrimination policies. These are the closest parallels for Rutgers.

In this section, we also survey the means by which caste was added to university policies, and here differences abound. Several schools directly made the change to their university non-discrimination policy (e.g., Brandeis). Some made changes initially to a union contract, which was used later by student advocates to prompt change to a larger university non-discrimination policy (e.g., Harvard). At some universities, a resolution was passed by the student senate that was then implemented following faculty and student efforts (e.g., Columbia and the University of Minnesota). At some universities (e.g., Colby College), efforts were initiated by the faculty to include caste as a protected category in the university’s non-discrimination policies. Rutgers has our own story, beginning with union negotiations, followed by the Task Force and this report.

As discussed at multiple points in this report, addressing caste-based discrimination on campus is a multi-pronged effort that requires educational and training components. In looking at similar efforts at other colleges and universities, we note:

- A few schools formally defined caste as part of their policies or interpretive guidance. For schools that did not formally define caste in policy documents that we could find, discussions leading up to the policy changes often included working definitions of caste—often similar to ours in this report (see section 1)—that informed the decision-making process.

- Several non-discrimination policies of United States universities with prohibitions against caste-based discrimination defined their scope and jurisdiction broadly to include off-campus occasions that affected their campus community members. In contrast, Rutgers’ non-discrimination policy appears to restrict itself to University operations and programs.

In addition to colleges and universities, we also surveyed United States political jurisdictions, like city councils and states, that have added, or attempted to add, caste as a protected category. We find that these cases provide insight into the broader trend to extend civil rights protections to cover caste-based discrimination in the United States as well as the mechanisms for change and challenges thereof.

## **Existing Efforts to Address Caste at Other U.S. Universities**

Brandeis was the first university to add caste as a protected category in the United States in their Policy against Discrimination, Harassment and Sexual Violence on December 17, 2019.[2] The jurisdiction of the Brandeis policy was explicitly defined to include both on and off campus discrimination that affects the Brandeis community. While acknowledging the limitations of addressing discrimination on occasions where the person accused may not be a Brandeis community member (or is a former community member), the Brandeis policy commits to providing information on available supportive measures and resources (both on and off campus) to address the issue. In contrast, the existing Rutgers policy against discrimination and harassment (60.1.12) is restricted to “all areas of University operations and programs” and therefore is limited to address some of the caste discrimination testimonies reported in Section 2 of this report.[3]

The seeming restriction of Rutgers non-discrimination policies to events on campus is beyond the purview of this Task Force. Still, it emerged as a notable contrast with the more expansive policies we surveyed at other public and private institutions of higher education. Accordingly, we flag the difference here, noting the limitations that Rutgers policy places on efforts to address caste and other forms of discrimination in our community. Moving forward, the University may wish to consider amending its discrimination policy to include off-campus incidents in order to effectively collect data and address discrimination of various types against Rutgers community members. The Task Force wants to underscore that even with current parameters of our non-discrimination policies, all Rutgers community members are encouraged to report any incidents of discrimination.

Several other universities followed suit after Brandeis University in addressing caste-based discrimination. Institutions such as Harvard and the California State University system (consisting of 23 campuses) added caste as a protected category and defined the scope of their jurisdiction broadly to include both on and off campus discrimination. For example, Harvard includes in its “University Non-discrimination Policy” conduct that occurs “off Harvard property” and “may have the effect of creating a hostile or abusive work or learning environment for a member of the University community.”[4] The California State University system includes in their non-discrimination policy conduct by a university member that “affected a Student’s or Employee’s ability to participate in a program, activity, or employment,” regardless of location.[5]

Several universities have first listed caste as a protected category through union negotiations and later added it to their non-discrimination policies, as this Task Force recommends that Rutgers do. Harvard University initially added caste to its Graduate Student Union Contract that was ratified in late fall 2021.[6] This then bolstered student-led advocacy on the campus in 2022, which later resulted in Harvard adding caste as a protected category in its larger University Non-discrimination Policy that has been effective since September 2023.[7]

Kartikeya Bhatotia, co-chair of the Casteless Caucus, a Harvard student organization involved in the negotiations around adding caste as a protected category commented, “Representation matters, and until we have some institutional checks in place that ensure there’s a commitment to justice, this [Grad Student Union Contract] will not be enough.”[8] Similar to Harvard, the University of Massachusetts Amherst added caste as a protected category through its most recent union contract with graduate students 2020–23 and amended its university-wide non-discrimination policy to add caste as a separate protected category (its scope also includes discrimination occurring off campus). [9]

While universities like Brandeis, Harvard, and UMass Amherst have added caste as a separate category, other universities like University of California Davis, University of Michigan, and Georgetown University have added caste as a subcategory with interpretive guidance. For example, University of California Davis included “caste or perceived caste” in parentheses under national origin (later, the entire University of California system included caste under “ancestry”).[10] University of Michigan states that caste-based discrimination is prohibited under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and allows for reporting casteism in its Discrimination Reporting Form, explicitly stating that, “To report caste-based discrimination you may select “national origin”, “religion”, “race” or “other.”[11] In contrast, as a graduate student at Rutgers noted in the 2020s, “Rutgers has no clear mechanism to raise a complaint of caste-based discrimination.”[12] Nothing in Rutgers policies explicitly prohibits submitting a bias or discrimination complaint based on caste, but this committee’s recommendations would create a more encouraging and validating environment for reporting caste-based discrimination.

At present, the University of Minnesota mixes the two approaches of adding caste as a separate versus a subsidiary category. The University of Minnesota student senate passed a resolution in fall 2021 that called for adding caste as a protected category.[13] After the resolution was passed, the chair of the Senate and Faculty Consultative Committees, Professor Ned Patterson, acknowledged the necessity for naming caste in the university policy given that there were reports of case-based discrimination on campus.[14] He added that the “resolution seeks to name [caste] outright in order to create awareness of the issue and remove any ambiguity.”[15] Following this, numerous schools within the University of Minnesota have added caste as an independent category, while the university overall covers it via explicit interpretive guidance within other categories (e.g., race, national origin).[16]

Other than the above-mentioned U.S. universities, Carleton University in Canada added caste as a protected category after the academic staff association passed a motion to do so in November 2021.[17] Some departments within U.S. universities have independently condemned caste-based discrimination, such as University of California San Diego’s Ethnic Studies Department.[18] Seattle-based colleges and universities are covered by a local ordinance against caste-based discrimination (discussed in the following section), regardless of whether their campus policies specify the point or not.

## U.S. University Efforts to Address Caste-Based Discrimination, Fall 2019–Winter 2024

School	Public/private status	Category	Definition or guidance	Timeline
Barnard College and Columbia University	private	new class	unspecified	Columbia's University Senate added "caste" as a protected category in April 2023; Barnard's administration followed suit in September 2023; the protection also extends to Teachers College.
Brandeis University	private	new class	caste is a "system of inherited social class"[19]	December 2019 (*first institution of higher education in the U.S. to explicitly bar caste-based discrimination)
Brown University	private	new class	caste is "a system of rigid social stratification characterized by hereditary status and social barriers sanctioned by custom, law or religion"[20]	fall 2022

## U.S. University Efforts to Address Caste-Based Discrimination, Fall 2019–Winter 2024

School	Public/private status	Category	Definition or guidance	Timeline
California State University System	public	race/ethnicity	“Race or Ethnicity includes ancestry, color, caste, ethnic group identification, and ethnic background. Race or Ethnicity is a Protected Status.”[21]	January 2022
Colby College	private	new class	unspecified	October 2021
Colorado College	private	new class	unspecified	March 2022
Georgetown University	private	ancestry/national origin	caste-based discrimination is included within “actual or perceived shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics, or citizenship or residency in a country with a dominant religion or distinct religious identity”[22]	unclear



## U.S. University Efforts to Address Caste-Based Discrimination, Fall 2019–Winter 2024

School	Public/private status	Category	Definition or guidance	Timeline
Harvard University	private	new class	caste is “a system of rigid social stratification characterized by hereditary status, endogamy and social barriers sanctioned by custom, law, or religion, that originated in South Asia,” as per the union contract[23]	Union contract in fall 2021, followed by student advocacy in 2022 that resulted in caste’s inclusion in Harvard’s discrimination policy in September 2023
Scripps College	private	new class	unspecified	March 2022
University of California (system)	public	ancestry	caste is “an individual’s perceived position in a system of social stratification on the basis of inherited status.”[24]	February 2024, from the Systemwide Office of Civil Rights
University of California, Davis	public	national origin	“national origin (including caste or perceived caste)”[25]	September 2021 (*first public institution of higher education in the U.S. to explicitly bar caste-based discrimination)

## U.S. University Efforts to Address Caste-Based Discrimination, Fall 2019–Winter 2024

School	Public/private status	Category	Definition or guidance	Timeline
University of Massachusetts Amherst	public	new class	unspecified	Initially addressed in a union contract in 2020, and subsequently added to the university's non-discrimination policy
University of Michigan	public	national origin/ religion/ race/ other	caste-based discrimination is "prohibited under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964"[26]	Passed by the Senate Assembly in 2022
University of Minnesota	public	race/ national origin/ religion	"For purposes of University policy, castes are rigidly hierarchical social classes that are assigned at birth based on one's family's caste, and cannot be changed during one's life." [27]	Senate discussions began in fall 2021, affected university policies in 2022

## Caste in Other U.S. Institutions and Political Jurisdictions

As of the time of writing (spring 2024), three U.S. jurisdictions have seriously attempted to add caste as a protected category in their non-discrimination laws, with two succeeding. We generally see an explicit attempt to define caste in these different legal policies that might be of use for the Rutgers community, especially for education initiatives surrounding caste.

On February 21, 2023, Seattle became the first city in the U.S. to ban caste-based discrimination. An ordinance, sponsored by an Indian American councilwoman, was passed that amended several sections of the Seattle Municipal Code to include protections against caste-based discrimination.[28] The ordinance refers to a New York Times article by professors Paula Chakravartty and Ajantha Subramanian where they argue that:

.... oppressed castes in the United States are doubly disadvantaged – by caste and race. Making caste a protected category under federal law will allow for the recognition of this double disadvantage.....Making caste a protected category is a critical step toward addressing the problem of caste in America. To protect oppressed castes in the United States, we have to be willing to insist that civil rights extend to communities whose oppression is still hidden.[29]

The Seattle ordinance refers also to a United Nations Special Rapporteur on minorities issues that highlights the wide-ranging exclusion and discrimination faced by lower castes. The rapporteur acknowledges that people tend to be more familiar with the South Asian caste system, but emphasizes that, in the present, caste is found within “diverse religious and/or ethnic groups in all geographical regions, including within diaspora communities.”[30] The Seattle ordinance acknowledges that caste identity is inextricably intertwined with other legally recognized protected characteristics (race, color, ancestry, religion, creed, and national origin), “such that discrimination based on one’s caste is effectively discrimination based on an amalgamation of the legally protected characteristics.”[31]

The Seattle ordinance cites precedents set by Brandeis University and the California State University system to strengthen the argument for adding caste as a protected category. In this sense, Rutgers—the largest public state university system in New Jersey—adopting explicit language against casteism on campus may well help the growing movement to outlaw caste-based discrimination on a state-wide level in New Jersey.[32]

After Seattle, Fresno, California followed suit in September 2023 by banning caste-based discrimination via a city ordinance. Similar to the Seattle Ordinance, the Fresno ordinance argues that adding caste as a protected category is consistent with “the guidance of the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division’s interpretation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act to include a prohibition against discrimination based on actual or perceived shared ancestry or citizenship in a country whose residents share a dominant religion or distinct religious identity.”[33]

In late 2023, the State of California failed to pass a bill banning caste-based discrimination, although only after producing extensive arguments and documents in the bill’s favor that remain pertinent to discussing caste in the U.S. The California bill, known as SB-403, was first introduced by a South Asian American California State Senator in early 2023. It sought to amend California’s Civil Code, Education Code, and Government Code in order to clarify that discrimination on the basis of ancestry included caste.[34] The bill passed by overwhelming majorities in both houses of the California legislature, even while being opposed by a small minority. It was also supported by a range of civil rights and legal groups, including the American Bar Association.[35] On October 7, 2023, Governor Newsom vetoed the popular bill, noting that caste-based discrimination was already covered under existing California state law.[36] Newsom’s words do not carry the legal force that SB-403 would have, if enacted. News sources later reported that Newsom’s veto was the result of pressure from a wealthy donor, and the governor faced condemnation by an array of groups, including Hindus for Human Rights.[37]

Outside of the United States, Toronto’s school board in Canada recognized the harms of caste-based discrimination in March 2023.[38] It called for the Ontario Human Rights Commission to assess and provide a framework for addressing caste oppression in the public education context. The Ontario Human Rights Commission issued its guidance in October 2023, confirming several points mentioned above. These include that caste is a social stratification system that is immutable and determined at birth, negatively impacts all aspects of life, and is “an intersectional system of discrimination.”[39] The Commission also cites the United Nations position against caste, noting “Caste-based discrimination is an internationally recognized violation of human rights.”[40]

## The Importance of Naming Caste

The impetus behind adding caste-based discrimination to university anti-discrimination policies came from different constituencies in discrete cases. At some schools, faculty members advocated for changes (e.g., Colorado College), whereas at others, students organized to petition the faculty and university administration to add protections (e.g., Scripps College). In some cases, institutions proactively added caste as a protected category as part of an effort to create a welcoming and safe community. At Rutgers, the graduate student and faculty union asked for this change, and the university administration agreed to the creation of this Task Force.

As noted above, many schools explicitly include caste in their policies as a protected category despite the fact that they determined caste was already protected under one or more existing categories. Why name a protected category that is already, implicitly, covered? One reason given for the explicit inclusion of caste was articulated by the Vice President for Institutional Equity and Diversity at Brown University in 2022: “The previous policy would have protected people experiencing caste discrimination, but we felt it was important to lift this up and explicitly express a position on caste equity.”[41]

Other institutions took the position that even though caste was not protected under federal or state protections, adding caste as a category reflected the will of the campus community, as per Brandeis's Chief Diversity Officer and Vice President for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in 2019:

There are other categories of identity that are prohibited based only on the will of the campus, that in this campus community we shall not discriminate against certain people. In that sense, caste does not receive currently federal, or to my knowledge, any state-level protections. We're not afraid to be leaders at Brandeis.[42]

At Colby College, articulating an explicit protection was viewed as part of generating an inclusive community. As per the Dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in 2021: "We have to be reflective on our policies and practices as an institution to make sure that we have the appropriate policies in place that really support the development of an inclusive community." [43]

Rutgers has made similar commitments to equity and inclusion in our university community, and so it is appropriate that we promote caste equity by explicitly condemning caste-based discrimination, alongside other kinds of discrimination already specified in our policies. Additionally, this Task Force believes considerable confusion exists among Rutgers professors and students about whether caste-based discrimination is permitted on campus.[44] Such widespread unclarity underscores that our existing policies are not sufficient. We believe the evidence we have presented here about the ways caste has been adopted into policies across the U.S. can open up possibilities for Rutgers to make similar positive changes.

## Section 4: Legal Background

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Despite growing resources and news coverage on how to best combat caste discrimination, this Task Force was able to identify only two municipalities nationally (and no states) that have passed legislation adding caste as a protected class to anti-discrimination laws, both of which were passed fairly recently. We also identified numerous universities that have added caste as addressed in section 3. Still, there is limited legal guidance on how to navigate enforcement of including caste as a protected category in our university policies.

### Laws Adding Caste as a Protected Category

The Task Force identified two municipalities nationwide that have added caste as a protected category to their existing anti-discrimination laws: Fresno, California (Ordinance No. 2023-031) and Seattle, Washington (Ordinance No. 126767). Both laws define “caste” as a “system of rigid social stratification characterized by hereditary status, endogamy, and social barriers sanctioned by custom, law, or religion” and caste discrimination as “based on birth and descent, and occurs in the form of social segregation, physical and psychological abuse, and violence.”[1]

The Task Force was unable to identify any case law interpreting the Fresno ordinance. There is one recent case, *Bagal v. Sawant*, No. C23-0721-RAJ (W.D. Wash., March 8, 2024) that addressed a facial (i.e., pre-enforcement) challenge to the Seattle ordinance under First and Fourteenth Amendments. In that case, the court dismissed the challenge based on the pleadings on the ground that the plaintiff lacked standing.

## Other Relevant Case Law

The Task Force identified one case that addressed a challenge to the addition of “caste” to a University policy. In *Kuman v. Koester*, No. 2:22-cv-07550-RGK-MAA (C.D. Cal. Nov. 21, 2023), the court addressed a facial (i.e., pre-enforcement) complaint brought by two California State University professors alleging that CSU’s amendment of its discrimination, harassment and retaliation policy to include “caste” as a protected class violated the First and Fourteenth Amendments. Ultimately, the court dismissed all of the claims for lack of standing, except the plaintiffs’ alleged violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which was dismissed on the merits.

Alternatively, there is at least one active case in the United States (as of spring 2024) that seeks to hold an institution accountable for failing to adequately address caste-based discrimination. In 2020, the California Civil Rights Department sued the tech company Cisco after the company allegedly failed to protect a Dalit engineer from caste-based discrimination at the hands of two upper-caste colleagues.[2] Cisco’s HR department had found evidence of discrimination but failed to take corrective action since they “did not consider casteism a form of discrimination falling under the Civil Rights Act.”[3] In 2023, the State of California dismissed the lawsuit against the two accused engineers but persisted in its legal action against Cisco.[4]

## Absence of Official Guidance

The Task Force did not identify any official guidance from state or federal agencies or offices tasked with interpreting state or federal non-discrimination laws that touches upon caste specifically. There are extensive interpretive frameworks regarding caste and caste-based discrimination from international bodies, such as the United Nations.[5]



The Task Force reviewed various law review and legal journal articles that touch on caste, summarizing various legal writers' opinions on whether caste-based discrimination could be covered under other categories and classes protected under existing state and federal laws. For example, in the Harvard Law Review article "Title VII and Caste Discrimination" (2021), authors Krishnamurthi and Krishnaswami discuss at length the "but for" causation and conceptual tests to better understand to what extent caste-based discrimination can be adjudicated under Title VII.[6] The authors opine that:

- Caste can be covered under the prohibition against national origin-based discrimination.
- Caste may be covered under the prohibition against race-based discrimination by relying on precedent for protecting against "ancestry discrimination."
- Caste can be covered by the prohibition against religious-based discrimination due to the connection between caste and religious heritage and/or standing in a religious society.

The authors go on to advocate for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to issue official guidance on Title VII's application to caste and/or for Congress to pass legislation explicitly stating that caste discrimination is unlawful under Title VII, further underscoring the absence of official guidance on this topic. The authors, like the Task Force, understand caste to be a phenomenon in many communities, calling for legal clarity in the United States that "all varieties of global 'caste' discrimination are unlawful and intolerable in a just society." [7]

There are several legal organizations that have weighed in on the issue in support of adding specific protection against caste-based discrimination in recent years. These include the ACLU California Action[8], the NAACP[9], and the South Asian Bar Association of North America[10].

Debates over legal protections concerning caste continue regarding the intertwined nature of the history of caste with race, national origin, and religion. Forthcoming legislation will undoubtedly lay the groundwork for evolving definitions, protections, and remedies. At this time, a minority on the Task Force felt that this critical legal foundation was absent and without this, Rutgers' non-discrimination policies should remain unchanged. Still, after months of deliberations and research, a majority felt differently, and so the recommendation that Rutgers add caste as a stand-alone protected category passed by a three-quarters majority (the other three recommendations were unanimous).

# Section 5: Educational Interventions

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Combatting caste-based discrimination at Rutgers University requires a multi-pronged strategy. We propose that strategy here, outlining many educational interventions that are designed to further our broad commitment to being a beloved community. Rutgers defines a “beloved community” as having “a commitment to work together to embody, reflect, and respect the complexities of all our parts.”[1] Caste-based discrimination works against these stated values, and, conversely, promoting caste equity will help cultivate a university environment in which all are respected. In making caste an explicitly protected category, Rutgers will follow more than a dozen other American universities and university systems. But we stand to be a leader—in the Big 10 and among other peer institutions—in forging and implementing a robust set of programs designed to educate around and combat caste-based discrimination.



Participants painting a banner titled “Educate, Agitate, Organize” for Ambedkar Jayanti (Ambedkar’s Birthday) event, Rutgers-New Brunswick, April 2024.

## Three Pillars and Tiered Goals

Our proposed interventions\* center around three key pillars: Awareness, Education, and Change.

**Awareness.** Every member of the Rutgers community should be aware of caste and the common forms that caste-based discrimination takes in our university community. At present, many members of the Rutgers community are unaware of caste at all, whereas others are only familiar with the specific caste system into which they were born, with little to no awareness of caste as a global phenomenon. Our recommendations here are tailored to speak to many specific groups on campus, including students, staff, faculty, and administrators.

**Education.** Members of the Rutgers community should be offered an array of educational resources to deepen their knowledge of caste and caste-based discrimination. This is essential within our mission as an educational institution that aspires, as part of our commitment to academic excellence, “to be the national model for outstanding academic programs, social mobility, and educational equity.”[2]

**Change.** We must all seek to disrupt the operation of caste-based discrimination at Rutgers, identifying casteism on individual and systemic levels. Just as the university has encouraged everyone at Rutgers to “become an anti-racist,”[3] so, too, would we like to see everyone become an anti-caste advocate and help make our community more equitable.

\*These strategies and interventions are distinct from the consensus-based recommendations that were voted on by the Task Force.

Our strategic plan to address caste-based discrimination at Rutgers is divided into short term, medium term, and long term goals. Short term goals can be accomplished within six months, medium term within one year, and long term goals require more than one year to fully implement (although they can be begun sooner). In pursuit of practical applicability, we discuss the implementation strategy for each suggested intervention, often citing a model event or program at Rutgers or (where we lack a Rutgers precedent) at other universities. This should substantially reduce the labor required to implement our suggestions, although some effort and expenditure is well justified in our pursuit of caste equity at Rutgers.

## **Short-term Goals (Achievable in under six months)**

Announce that Rutgers is formally banning caste-based discrimination, as per the recommendation of this Task Force.

- Implementation: In announcing this, we encourage Rutgers to draw upon our faculty strengths and use the announcement as an educational opportunity. For example, Barnard College announced their nondiscrimination caste policy with an in-depth interview of Professor Anupama Rao who researches caste.[4]

Include mentions that caste-based discrimination is unacceptable in all relevant Rutgers handbooks, along with a basic definition of caste.[5] This should include handbooks for incoming students, faculty, and staff.

- Implementation: The President's Office or the Office of the Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs should issue internal guidelines to all relevant schools and bodies that are responsible for handbooks. Then the changes should be made as per each unit's update procedures.











Begin an educational marketing campaign around the operation of caste in university spaces and Rutgers commitment to ending caste-based discrimination.

- **Implementation:** This should be run out of the Office of University, Equity & Inclusion in partnership with Student Affairs. In part, this campaign should focus on generating awareness about the harms of casteism more broadly in American society and in this sense can draw on larger surveys and tools, such as the below infographic that represents findings from a widely-respected 2016 survey of caste in the South Asian American community.[6] The campaign should advertise the findings and work in this report. In cultivating further materials, we encourage drawing upon staff and faculty expertise and skills honed through Rutgers' anti-racism work in recent years.

## Key Conclusions for Caste-based Discrimination in the United States

It is clear from the findings of this report that Caste definitively exists in the diaspora. A summary of the data shows the scope of the problem. Caste in its manifestations has structural, interpersonal, and internal consequences that we must address.

-  **25%** of Dalits who responded said they had faced **verbal or physical assault** based on their Caste.
-  **ONE IN THREE** Dalit students report being **discriminated against during their education.**
-  **TWO OUT OF THREE** Dalits surveyed reported being **treated unfairly at their workplace.**
-  **60%** of Dalits report experiencing **Caste-based derogatory jokes** or comments.
-  **40%** of Dalits and **14%** of Shudra respondents were made to feel **unwelcome at their place of worship** because of their Caste.
-  **20%** of Dalit respondents report feeling **discriminated at a place of business** because of their Caste.
-  **OVER 40%** of Dalit Respondents have reported being **rejected in a Romantic Partnership** on the basis of Caste.
-  **ONE IN TWO** of all Dalit respondents and **ONE IN FOUR** of all Shudra respondents **live in fear of their Caste being "outed."**

These results reveal serious levels of discrimination and violence within our communities. The following are our immediate recommendations for the many stakeholders who work with the South Asian community.

In addition to this data, included in Appendix I is a summary of the collection of demographic data outlining income, education and other information gathered from the survey.

Sponsor a keynote talk by a well-known anti-caste American activist to launch the Rutgers commitment to implementing the Task Force’s report.

- Implementation: This should be sponsored by the President’s Office as well as the Chancellor’s office on the campus on which the event is held. It should be modeled on the highly successful November 2021 lecture given at Rutgers University-Newark by author and activist Yashica Dutt, about her book *Coming Out as Dalit*, which was supported by the History Department and the Rutgers-Newark Chancellor’s Office.[7] The University Task Force on Caste Discrimination co-chairs or Rutgers faculty who work on caste should be consulted for a list of suitable speakers.

With the support of the Rutgers-Newark Chancellor's Office and the Federated Department of History

**DISCUSSION WITH YASHICA DUTT ON CASTE PREJUDICES AND COMING OUT AS DALIT**

COMING OUT AS **DA  
LI**  
a memoir  
YASHICA DUTT

Yashica Dutt (she/her) is a leading anti-caste expert, journalist and award-winning author. Dutt is an emerging figure recognized for highlighting Dalit rights globally and her work has been published in the New York Times, Foreign Policy and The Atlantic.

November 16, 2021, 4-5:20 p.m. EST  
Register (virtual event): <https://go.rutgers.edu/casteprejudice>

Provide financial support for graduate-student working groups focused on caste.

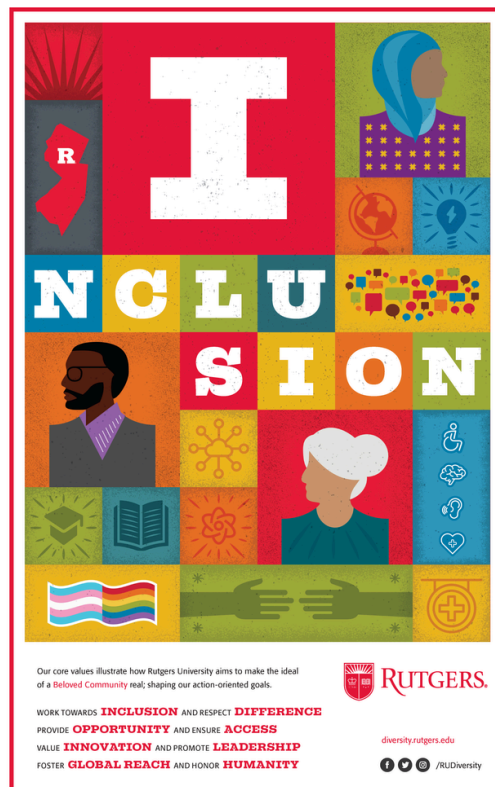
- There is robust interest already among Rutgers graduate students regarding caste, as evidenced by the “Global Anti-Caste Thought” Working Group that flourished under the Global Asias rubric during the 2023–24 academic year. [8] We recommend that Rutgers earmark ongoing support for this group or a similarly-focused one.

## Medium-Term Goals (Achievable in six to twelve months)

Disseminate information and materials to all major groups within the Rutgers community that communicate Rutgers stance against caste-based discrimination.

- Implementation: This should include but is not limited to the following, each directed at a discrete audience–
  - Including discussion of caste-based discrimination and its unacceptability in Rutgers orientation programs for undergraduate & graduate students.
  - Recommend language that prohibits caste-based discrimination to be used on syllabi. This should be developed and distributed via normal channels for preexisting required and recommended syllabi language.
  - Notify department chairs of Rutgers policy on caste-based discrimination through the department chair meetings on each campus. Chairs should be asked to communicate the same to their departments at faculty meetings.
  - Offer required training modules on caste to deans and administrators, on the model of Rutgers-New Brunswick STRIDE trainings.[9]

One of nine posters developed by Rutgers to encourage diversity, equity, and inclusion universitywide





Cultivate and Debut a “Becoming Anti-Casteist” webpage at Rutgers

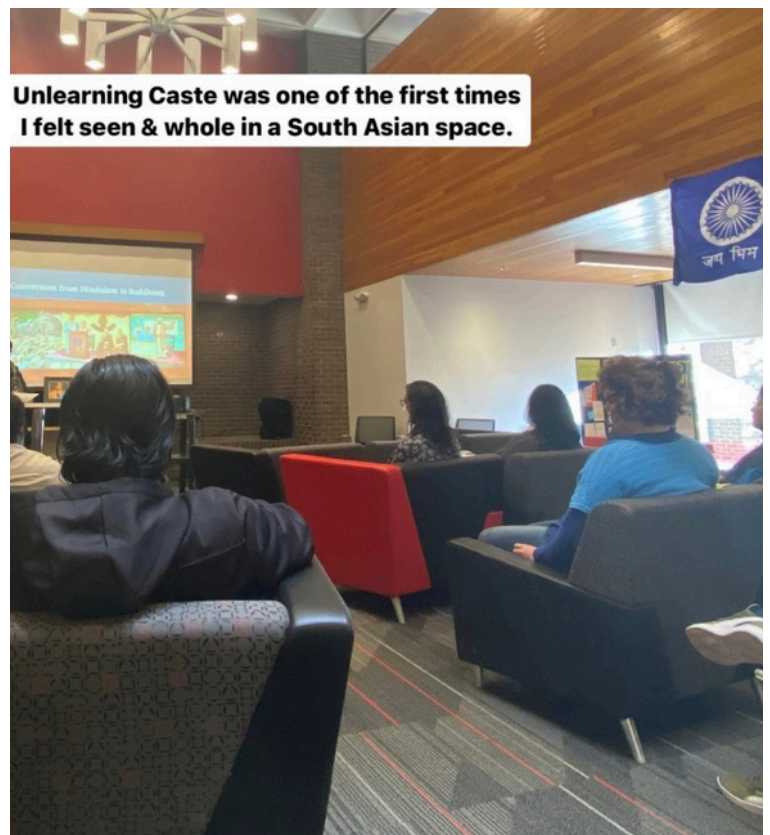
- Implementation: This should be modeled on Rutgers “Becoming Anti-Racist” webpage, developed by the Division of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement.[10] Like that model regarding race, Rutgers “Becoming Anti-Casteist” webpage should include educational videos by experts (including at Rutgers) that place caste in a broad social context as well as discussion of what it means to be an anti-casteist at Rutgers. The University should consult with and integrate the views of those who pushed for changes to Rutgers policies regarding caste, including union leaders and spokespersons for the push toward caste equity on campus.



Rutgers “Becoming Anti-Racist” webpage

Sponsor a series of teach-ins on all Rutgers campuses about caste

- Implementation: Rutgers has sponsored talks and events centered around caste in the past, such as the “Dalit Women Fight” event in fall 2015 and the University Working Group on Dalit and Adivasi Research’s panel discussion on Dalit feminism and femininity in spring 2019.[11] In spring 2024, a student-led collective of South Asian Students and Workers at Rutgers sponsored a conversation titled “Unlearning Caste” that met a positive response, with an undergraduate student remarking on social media afterwards: “Unlearning Caste was one of the first times I felt seen & whole in a South Asian space.” We recommend drawing on both Rutgers faculty and those at other universities to create a robust set of opportunities over the next academic year and beyond.



Unlearning Caste event  
Rutgers-New Brunswick, Spring 2024

## Long-Term Goals (Require one year or more to implement)

Collect voluntary identification of caste status pursuant to achieving greater equity.

- Implementation: Rutgers collects voluntary self-identification of race/ethnicity to help the university “to build a modern and diverse workforce.”[12] We recommend a similar voluntary program to identify caste status in order to gain further information about the caste make-up of our community and where we might improve in fostering greater representation and diversity.

Create a dedicated fellowship or visiting scholar position to offer courses about caste and caste-based discrimination at Rutgers.

- Implementation: This can roughly follow the University of Pennsylvania’s postdoctoral fellowship on caste and social exclusion.[13] It will direct sorely needed academic attention to caste. More long-term, Rutgers should consider a more robust initiative, along the lines of Columbia’s Ambedkar Initiative, that can host regular talks, events, and cultivate courses.

Systematically collect stories of caste-based discrimination at Rutgers.

- Implementation: This Task Force collected ad hoc anecdotal stories of caste-based discrimination at Rutgers (see Section 2 of this report), and that led to two major conclusions. One, caste-based discrimination is a feature of life for many in the Rutgers community and must be addressed. Two, we hungered for more information and were unable to achieve it, given the limitations of this Task Force. We recommend that the President’s Office or the Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning spearhead a more systematic, large-scale collection of data and experiences, surveying students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni in order to gain greater information about the extent and nature of caste-based discrimination in the Rutgers community. This should be done by individuals with cultural competency regarding caste and in consultation with groups that promote caste equity in the United States.

Review Rutgers recruitment practices to ensure representation from diverse castes.

- Implementation: This should complement and build upon the voluntary collection of caste identity, recommended above. The goal is to ensure that Rutgers is aware of how it may be unintentionally privileging upper-caste individuals and thereby perpetuating a non-diverse climate on campus.

Organize healing circles for, separately, the caste-oppressed and the caste-privileged.

- Implementation: Caste Healing Circles can be modeled on the Racial Healing Circles facilitated by Rutgers-Newark's Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Center.[14] The goal is to facilitate hard conversations and personal exploration of individual and systemic biases regarding caste. We recommend drawing upon Rutgers faculty and graduate student expertise in this regard. A set of resources that might help with cultivating materials aimed at caste-privileged communities is The Aeroqram's "Caste Privilege 101." [15]



# Notes

## Introduction

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## Section 1

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[9] Yengde, “Global Castes,” 356.

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[14] Yashica Dutt, *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir of Surviving India’s Caste System* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2024), p. 96.

[15] Sonia Paul, “Trapped in Silicon Valley’s Hidden Caste System,” *Wired*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.wired.com/story/trapped-in-silicon-valleys-hidden-caste-system/>.

[16] From “Testimonies about Casteism and Caste-Based Discrimination at Rutgers” in section 2 of this report.

[17] McDermott, “From Hinduism to Christianity,” 236.

[18] City of Seattle, Ordinance 126767, <https://seattle.legistar.com/ViewReport.ashx?M=R&N=Text&GID=393&ID=5226902&GUID=9CC1715D-2363-4C39-9A58-81442C7888B0&Title=Legislation+Text>.

[19] Yengde, “Global Castes,” 345.

[20] “Testimonies about Casteism and Caste-Based Discrimination at Rutgers,” section 2 of this report.

[21] Phillip Martin, “Caste Bias isn’t Illegal in the United States. But this University is Trying to Fight it,” *GBH*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.wgbh.org/news/national/2019-02-27/caste-bias-isnt-illegal-in-the-united-states-but-this-university-is-trying-to-fight-it>.

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[2] Adur and Narayan, “Stories of Dalit Diaspora,” 244.

[3] Adur and Narayan, “Stories of Dalit Diaspora,” 244–45.

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- [15] Patterson, “Message from the Chair.”
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