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Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor, State of California
1021 O Street, 9th Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Governor Newsom:

On behalf of Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF), a national Sikh American advocacy organization serving communities throughout California and the nation, I write in support of Senate Bill 403, a bill that would prohibit discrimination based on ancestry and caste in employment, housing, and public accommodations.

Sikhs first arrived in California in 1899 and the first Sikh gurdwara (congregational place of worship) in the United States was established in Stockton, CA in 1912. Today, hundreds of thousands of Sikh Americans call California home, where they embody Sikhism's values of optimism, hard work, sacrifice, and equality. From its very beginnings, Sikhism was defined by its defiance of the caste system and belief in equality for all; radical ideas in the caste-based society that India has historically been and arguably remains today.

Caste is a system of social stratification rooted in the ancient history of South Asia and characterized by a rigid social hierarchy. Each position is characterized by hereditary status and exclusion, as well as related cultural values around 'protection' and 'pollution' of bloodlines. It impacts an estimated 5.7 million South Asian Americans and other indigenous populations from around the world who call America home. Data from Equality Labs show 1 in 4 caste-oppressed people have faced physical and verbal violence, 1 in 3 have faced education discrimination, and 2 out of 3 are impacted by workplace discrimination.

In California, caste discrimination occurs across industries, including technology, education, construction, restaurants, domestic work, and medicine. Caste discrimination against Dalits - people formerly called "untouchables" by those of other castes - includes bullying, harassment, bias, wage theft, sexual harassment, housing discrimination, and even trafficking. Equality Labs' findings on caste discrimination in the US are corroborated by several reputable publications, including [NPR](#), [CNN](#),

[Washington Post](#), [Harpers Bazaar](#), [PRI](#), [New York Times](#), [Time](#), [Vice](#), [Wired](#), [BBC](#), and more. Recent lawsuits like the [Cisco Case](#) and the [BAPS temple case](#) also speak to the growing problem of caste discrimination in North America.

In the Punjabi community, the region where many Sikhs trace their ancestry, members of the Ravidassia community are one of the largest caste oppressed communities across the State of California and are among the oldest South Asian communities. The story of caste oppressed people like the Dalits and Ravidassias must drive this civil rights issue.

Adding caste as a protected category would make explicit that caste oppressed Californians are protected by civil rights and non-discrimination law, including making it clear that employers must protect all of their vulnerable workers. It also would encourage all California workplaces to raise their cultural competencies on caste discrimination.

On behalf of SALDEF and the Sikh American community, I respectfully request your signature on Senate Bill 403.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kiran Kaur Gill
Executive Director