

# **Persisting Hierarchies Perpetuating Inequalities Historically Lived Realities of Dalits in Rural Himachal Pradesh**

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## **Introduction**

Analysis of *changing caste hierarchies and their political implications in rural Himachal Pradesh*, is an extremely complex phenomenon, for it involves paradoxically posited concepts like caste hierarchy (*closed and discrete*) and democratization (*opening, participatory and indiscrete*) and methodological problems of developing consistencies on the basis of available inconsistent historical data on both the concepts, their operational aspects and inter-relationships. There is definite lack of consistent historical data and records on castes, hierarchies, levels of socio-economic and political development of different caste groups in the rural areas. The existence of approximately 124 communities (Singh, 1996), representing divisions into castes, tribes, religions and ethnics and their *Varna* based gradations— *ex-untouchables and touchables*, with principle of purity and pollution constituting central element of stratification on the one hand and the hierarchies based on the social, economic and political attributes constituting social classes on the other make the analysis of the issue in its entirety in the context of a research paper more complex. Amidst the given realities the caste identities based on clan names, often derived from Brahmin ascetics or *Rishis* by the ex-untouchable and touchable castes further add to the challenge of identification and classification of castes and caste hierarchies.

In addition to the said, Himachal Pradesh has a distinct history of state formation— pre-British small kingdoms ruled by Rajas exercising absolute centralized authority with a battery of *Wazirs* (Ministers) forming hierarchical structure comprising high castes on the one hand and castes of service providers and menials on the other within further division into those in the service of ruling

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class and others in the service of common citizenry. The post British, beginning from 1848 AD to April 15, 1948, almost 100 years of British Raj witnessed considerable changes affecting the old hierarchies to some extent as a conglomeration of princely states, intervened by Deputy Commissioner and other functionaries Deputy Assistant Commissioner, village headman, *Lambardar* (Revenue collector) and *Chowkidars* (village watchmen) introduced by the British to affect social, economic, political and administrative changes decentralized legal and hereditary officers authority structure. Then comes the post-independent India during which Himachal Pradesh from Chief Commissioner's territory on April 15, 1948 matured into Eighteenth state of Union of India on January 25, 1971, covering a period of almost 23 years and during which considerable efforts went into democratization at the grass roots level aimed at transforming political system, decentralized legal and constitutional authority structure. Since different parts of the present day Himachal Pradesh have been merged and remerged from time to time with different administrative and political set up this is difficult to find uniform and classified data. While constitutionally the state is divided into 12 districts, *another division based on people's mindset divides the state into 'Old' and 'New' Himachal, the latter comprising territories of erstwhile Punjab, and the former does not consider the latter Himachal. In the words of a university Professor from upper Himachal, lower Himachal represents the Third World.*

In addition to said the conceptual problems gripping caste arising from the divergent explanations— sociological and anthropological, indological with emphasis on cultural, sacred dimension involving purity and pollution, structural and secular involving social, economic and political power dimensions, and consequent differential basis of formation and existence of hierarchies add to the complexities. Since there has been evolution of concept of caste since its first appearance as *varna* in the later hymn of Rig Veda, to race during the British rule in India, and its present form on the one hand and in similar basis the changing basis of hierarchies, methodologically there is need also to arrive at conceptual

consensus in view of their varying perspectives and theoretical formulations from time to time.

In the backdrop of some of the formidable complexities involved in the context of changing caste hierarchies and their political implications in Himachal Pradesh, this paper for the purpose of analytical clarities and methodological consistencies is divided into four parts, each part aimed at overcoming the complexities in a logical manner in order to develop a coherent explanation of the theme of the paper:

First, the prevailing scenario— problems, issues and questions pertaining to hierarchies, both at the manifest as well as latent level;

Second, continuity in the process of hierarchical formations amidst change—the democratization of economy and polity in India;

Third, an examination of the nature and type of interface between caste hierarchies and democratization in Himachal Pradesh along the following parameters:

- (i) Whether untouchability, atrocities and traditional hierarchies persist or have withered away due to State action and civil society?;
- (ii) Whether the change in hierarchies resisted with reference to emerging conflicts between the traditional hierarchies and the new social formations?; and,
- (iii) Whether the increasing political participation of the erstwhile deprived population segments giving rise to identity assertion and counter-productive measures?

Finally, the paper concludes with regard to the implications of changing or not so changing caste hierarchies for the political system and the social structure of Himachal Pradesh.

## **Prevailing Scenario: Problem, Issues and Questions**

The existence of civil disabilities “*Mandiron mein abhi bhi Shudron ka Pravesh Nishedh (Even now entry of Shudras banned in the temple)*”, (*Dainik Bhaskar*, April 16, 2011)<sup>1</sup>, and the discriminatory practices, at times, pass un-noticed for quite some time— days or even months, but certainly raise many questions *vis-à-*

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<sup>1</sup>. A Hindi daily reported about a board hung at the Shiv Temple adjoining Markandeya Shiv Temple, a place of pilgrimage at Bilaspur, Himachal Pradesh with an inscription *Mandiron mein abhi bhi Shudron ka Pravesh Nishedh*.

vis equality, justice and fraternity in a democratic set-up. The question acquires more serious connotations when the organizations representing scheduled castes, remain silent over the issue and take cognizance of the offences being committed only after media highlights them. In the case of the above incidence *Shri Guru Ravi Das Sabha* acted only after media highlight of the incidence, then protested and demanded the arrest of the culprits, namely the members of Temple Committee and the Baba/Priest. Even the Police, after ten days of the incident on April 26, 2011 removed the board and registered a case against the Temple committee and the priest. The judiciary, the Himachal Pradesh High Court, also swung into action taking *suo motto* notice of the criminal offence and issued notice to the district administration including the Deputy Commissioner, Superintendent of Police, and Additional District Magistrate along with Temple Committee to reply within a period of one month. Almost more than two months have passed but there is no news about the follow-up action, thus leaving the question open for debate and discourse *whether the caste hierarchies really changing?*

The fact, however, is that the above cited case does not represent a rare and isolated incidents but such happenings in varying forms have been occurring through out the country from time to time suggesting social discrimination, prejudices, atrocities and violence against Dalit segment of population placed at the lowest of the hierarchy by those placed on the higher position in the social hierarchy. This is evident from the statistics on crime against Dalits in India released by *National Human Rights Commission Report on the Prevention and Atrocities against Scheduled Castes* (<http://www.nhrc.nic.in/Publications/reportKBSaxena.pdf>):

“Every 18 minutes a crime is committed against Dalit, every day their three women raped, two murdered, 2 houses burnt, 11 Dalits beaten and every week 13 Dalits murdered, 5 home or possessions burnt, and 6 are kidnapped or abducted. The socio-economic conditions of Dalits in India reveal 37 percent living below poverty in India, more than half (54%) of their children undernourished, 83 per 1000 live birth children born have the probability of dying before the first birthday, 45 percent do not know read and write, their women burden double discrimination (gender and caste),

only 27 percent of their women have institutional deliveries in India, about one third of their households do not have basic facilities, the public health workers refuse to visit their homes in 33% of the villages, prevented from entering police station in 27.6% of villages, their children have to sit separately while eating in 37.8% of Government schools, do not get mail delivered to their homes in 23.5% of villages, denied access to water sources in 48.4% of villages because of segregation and untouchability practices, half of their children are undernourished, 21% are severely underweight and 12% die before their 5th birthday, and literacy rates for women are as low as 37.8% in rural India. The conviction rate under SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act is 15.71% and pendency is as high as 85.37%. This is the case when the Act has strict provisions aimed as a deterrent”.

The situation in Himachal Pradesh though not as bad is seen in the case of India as a whole but the records indicate 337 such incidents having occurred during the past five years (32 in 2005, 67 in 2006, 83 in 2007, 69 in 2008 and 86 in 2009 (State Crime Bureau, Shimla, 2009). Out of which 40.65 percent of the cases are pending for decision whereas only 1.48 percent has been convicted and 55.00 percent cases simply disposed of by the courts. The occurrence of such incidents in a democratic state not only suggests persistence of caste discrimination, social disabilities and untouchability but also exposes the critical paradoxes gripping this hill state:

First, the relationship between caste system and the democratization of society is paradoxical. While caste system is expected to entail hierarchies the democratization process, however, should be curtailing hierarchies. However, in reality, the democratization with electoral politics in the centre stage in the acquisition of political power tends to facilitate and reinforce caste hierarchies to a considerable extent;

Second, the magnitude of the crime against Dalits being low there prevails fragmented Dalit consciousness, which otherwise in a democratic set up expected to be encouraging participation, equality, liberty and high degree of social consciousness;

Third, police, the custodian of law and order meant to ensure no occurrence of such incidents, in view of the fragmented Dalit consciousness also tends to act only when the pressures mount through some protest, indicating thereby prevalence of predominantly Hindu mindset in the functioning of law and order maintaining institutions, a reflection on probable operation old hierarchies in the law and order maintaining forces. A recent order of the Director General of HP police

calling upon the police officer to shun their caste tags from their name plates also bears a testimony to the existence of hierarchies affecting police functioning;

Fourth, the judiciary's pro-activism and consequently issuing of a notice to the district administration and others in the case of recent incident indicates a ray of hope for some justice. But the facts emerging from the above cited data on number of complaints, extremely limited number of convictions, summarily disposing of most of the complaints and the victimization of the complainants raise issues on the elusiveness of the justice system.

The problems further aggravates due to the contradictions between what the Preamble to the Constitution of India proclaims *India a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic committed to secure to all its citizens justice, liberty, equality and fraternity* (Basu, 2001: 21) and the ground realities suggesting lack of individual sovereignty, inequalities, in-egalitarian pattern of socio-economic and political development, further jeopardizing justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. A report of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment placed before Parliament containing merely factual information given by the states about registration and disposal of cases (<http://www.nhrc.nic.in/Publications/reportKBSaxena.pdf>) suggests,

“Under-reporting of Atrocities Act cases is a very common phenomenon and therefore the decline in the number of registered cases does not provide a true picture of the incidence of atrocities. A large number of cases which deserve to be registered under Protection of Civil Rights Act or the SCs & STs (Prevention of Atrocities) Act are not actually registered under these Acts, either due to ignorance of law or under pressure from the interested parties. Investigations even in limited number of cases, often done in a slipshod manner, are considerably delayed”.

The paradox becomes more glaring when even the contemporary development process, characterized by liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG) of economy, polity and society expected to curtail caste and related inequalities entails caste discrimination, untouchability and civil disabilities. In fact, the paradoxical relationship between caste system and democracy that existed in the early seventies is, perhaps, not different from what prevails even today despite setting in of the democratic processes,

“The gravest evil of the caste system is that it has rendered our society undemocratic. ... it has outlived its utility and has become now a painful, undemocratic, and anti-national anachronism”, (Chandrasekhar, 1972: xxi).

The rural India even today is caught up in a highly contradictory situation. While the rapid strides of socio-economic and political changes tend to liberalize social structure including social, economic and political relations, the age old not as fast changing religious and cultural practices continue to reinforce the age old rigid hierarchies, based on *‘endogamy and hereditary sub-divisions, ranked in an order of high and low’* (Kroeber, 1930: 254). Moreover, the distinctive patterns of asymmetrical social interaction and social relationships based on the socio-economic and political inequalities supported by the cultural traditions continue to a considerable extent. Whatever changes have been witnessed are partly due to the process of democratization and partly indicate ex-untouchables entering the power structure. But the continuous dependence of Dalit leadership on the higher caste political lobbies and political parties to climb up have not changed substantially, which continues to influence and perpetuate the hierarchical structures and inequalities, legitimized by cultural practices and the traditions forming the dominant themes of Hindu philosophy (see Opler, 1972). Hence, several questions of utmost significance arise here:

Whether the deep rooted hierarchical patterns of relationships based on caste, economic and political inequalities continue to survive and therefore tend to surface and resurface from time to time even after more than sixty-three years of country’s independence?

Second, what is the nature of formation or origin of caste hierarchy that despite various pressures on it from different quarters continues to survive?

Third, whether the new democratic system provides sufficient space to those placed at lower levels to articulate their interests?

Fourth, what are the impediments in the way of Dalit consciousness to become a formidable force, denting caste hierarchies and with acquisition of power to impinge upon the basic and fundamental human rights of the Dalits?

Fifth, what makes the law enforcing agencies, the police, judiciary, and also the other socio-religious organizations to refrain from taking immediate cognizance and action against the heinous practices emanating from the caste hierarchies?

Finally, whether the process of democratization of economy and polity in rural India aiming at destruction of the old hierarchies result in change in the caste relations of dominance and subordination or else the entire process result in change along with reconstruction of new hierarchies, though somewhat liberal, but reinforcing the same hierarchical social, economic and political relationships between and within social formations.

Since the existing paradoxes between caste and democracy give rise to many questions the issue of changing caste hierarchies and democratic politics needs in-depth examination in a historical perspective.

### **Hierarchies and Caste Hierarchies: Theoretical Preview**

The human society in the early years of its formation has, perhaps, been more egalitarian with differentiation in roles with either no or constricted hierarchies, a stage in the development of human society, which Durkheim (1964) called *mechanical solidarity* in pre-industrial society representing highly undifferentiated, characterized by similarity of functions, resemblances, and a common consciousness and Spencer (1965) termed *simple society with immanent harmony of interests*. Could the state of un-differentiation and immanent harmony of interests remain for ever? Of course not as human society has also been subject to change due to natural, geographical and human factors. Sorokin (1928) observed that even in the simplest mode of human existence some kind of hierarchical arrangements existed. He argued that *an un-stratified society with real equality among its members has never been realized in the history of mankind*.

Logically, since the society has never been static the transition from one type of social order to another has therefore been a process increasing hierarchical social formations. This is evident from the fact that initially based on sex, age and the physical strength which mattered in the given mode of production— hunting and gathering. Later, settled horticulture, agricultural and feudal order brought in division of labour, private property and social classes



arranged in an hierarchical order representing pyramid like social structure the power vested in the hands of a few on the top and the structure gradually expanding with every successive social class to the bottom representing the commoners (Cox, ). The transition from feudal to capitalist mode the social organization of society further changed into a high level of interdependence, industrial development and high volume of population and moral and material density (Swingewood, 2000: 68-69). A systematic perusal of history of social organization of human society suggests that the human beings in order to fulfill their basic needs the volume of which quantified with increasing population density always and in continuous process organized production system. Since needs multiplied they improved upon the technologies, created suitable and specific skills and human resources. At some stage, especially with origin of private property (Engles, 1942), their ranking and gradation in terms of their relative significance and contribution to the commodity production resulted into relative rewards and corresponding position in the social structure.

In the contemporary world such an arrangement, which might have become a necessity at one point of time is considered a “conscious device” to facilitate variety of functions necessary for the fulfillment of societal goals. The differential rewards associated with one’s role and status is significant factor motivating the incumbents of different roles and statuses to perform their roles adequately and efficiently (Davis & Moore, 1969). However, Marx (1971) a critique of political economy of societal organization believed that human beings have innovative nature characterized by projective consciousness which conceives the external realities, cognize them and then produce the concrete objects. The hierarchical formations, therefore, are not used simply to facilitate work but also being linked with private property, mode of production and determining power relations become the instrument of ruling classes to ensure not only existence of social, economic and political inequalities but also their perpetuation. Though Marx envisaged the idea that the internal contradictions and antagonistic interests lead to progressive change which would ultimately

subsume all classes and result into a communist state, but subsequent developments in the world at large have only resulted into proliferation of classes and hierarchies.

Apart from the economic forces, other factors have also contributed to the development and growth of hierarchies, and hierarchies within hierarchies. Weber (1978) in *Class, Status and Party* refers not only to economic alone but also to social and political factors in the formation of different types of rank orders— the classes in the market situation, social groups in the social sphere based not on economic but also their social prestige and esteem, and the political parties in the power sphere. Weber's thesis suggests three distinct hierarchies based on three factors which are of exclusive nature. However, these three factors being influential in nature also impact each other and therefore also have an inclusive dimension and therefore also constitute a macro social structure with micro structures within. One notable feature that emerges from the brief reference to hierarchies and heir formation is their direct correspondence with the mode of production organization and skill formation. The successive changes in the mode of production— from hunting and gathering to settled agriculture, to collective, feudal to capitalist and post-capitalist, the society remains under a continuous process of inducing changes in the nature, type and dimensions of overall social hierarchy, thus also resulting in new hierarchies within hierarchies (see Dahrendorf, 1959).

When did social hierarchies came into being in India is difficult to state because of *no single date of the origin of Indian society* (Thapar, 1976). However, reference to Varna, a four-fold hierarchical system based on *Karma* and *Guna* corresponding to group's role in the society with possibility of social mobility is traced from *Rig Veda*, the third phase of Vedic period as well as from epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabhart*. In the former one comes across a nuber of nomenclatures, such as *Kshatriay*, *Brahman*, *Malecha*, *Kewat*, *devtas* and *Asura*, *Raja* and *Praja* an so on and in the latter Lord Krishna saying he himself created the four *Varnas*. This hierarchical system of the ancient times has survived till

date. In addition, there are caste hierarchies and within these sub-caste hierarchies. Thus there are several entities within varna, castes and sub-castes, each one having graded and ranked, high and low placed entities representing hierarchies. Opler (1972: 4-5) observed that there is '*very little in Indian life and thought which is not placed in some hierarchical series*', implying thereby that *almost everything in the Indian way of life is graded, ranked and hierarchized—may it be holy men or sadhus, interpretations pertaining to age, sex, food, work, and even the parts of the body*. How did the notion of hierarchy emerge in almost all spheres of human life is traceable from religion oriented Hindu Texts prescribing rites and rituals, ways of social interaction and exchange (commensal and connubial).

The hierarchical organization of society in the ancient times, is believed to have originated in the process of social organization of a village, in which, says Kosambi (1977), the presence of six classes for the purposes of production was a pre-requisite. It also implies that these classes forming production relations were not castes and their relative position in the production system was determined by their respective position in the relations of production. When these classes became castes is a question needs explorations into the history with *special reference to the fusion of production system with religion and ritual systems*, and also analysis of what Gupta (2000) called *jati puranas or origin tales carrying the cultural legacy and heritage of each caste* (Gupta, 2001: 37). The indological understanding of hierarchy formation on the basis of principle of ritual purity and impurity, based on the Hindu Texts, though debatable but constitute an important source, especially with reference to the existence of ground realities of hierarchical layers, some included and other despite an integral component but excluded for all practical purposes and assigned the lowest status. Dumont (1970) the proponent of this theory argued that hierarchy is crucial in the Hindu way of life, with fixed positions at the top and the bottom and what happens between the two extreme is not of any significance. By implication the macro social structure represented through the hierarchy remains fixed but changes

within the structure are possible due to upward or the downward mobility of the constituent groups in the middle. At the same time such an explanation is not tenable in the contemporary times due to two factors. First, Dumont based his analysis on the book of ritual procedures (Das, 1977) in which there exist binary opposition between right and the left, the former is considered pure whereas the latter impure. However, in the same ritual procedures he failed to notice the mediations taking place. Second, there have been Brahman and non-Brahman dominant castes. In such cases the basis of hierarchy was not the ritual status but the economic and political power wielded by the group due to which it acquired social dominance. Therefore a considerable literature thus talks of secular basis of hierarchy rather than purely a ritual one.

Dealing with this issue at length Berreman (1979) argues that a caste system (*hierarchical order*) occurs when a society is composed of three components: First, birth ascribed status, second, hierarchically ordered, and third, culturally distinct groups. The second attribute of hierarchy is critical as it entails three things, first, differential evaluation, differential power and rewards (*primarily material*), and third, differential association. By implications the hierarchy in the economic production sphere, social situations and political power relations is interactional in nature as in each of the situations the different components of hierarchy are dependent upon each other. The patterns of interaction reflect upon the caste positions of different groups. It is also thus suggested that since castes in various social matters tend to have intensive and status-equal interaction within the framework of caste it also assures a common and distinctive caste culture. Since the castes are also discrete social and cultural entities the caste hierarchies are discontinuous or one can say they are more of fortified entities. The fortification by castes, according to many theoretical formulations has been for the maintenance of *status quo* by Brahmans to their own ritual status, economic and political advantage (Mayer).

Whatever, has been published about caste hierarchies in the Indian context suggests besides evaluation of castes in ritual purity and pollution terms,

the economic and political dimensions have been of significant value. The latter signifies that in the face of economic and political power structure which gives the caste its nature, the purity-pollution notions remains subdued (ibid.). Interestingly, there are living examples of royal houses belonging to *Shudra varna*. These include *Maharashtrian Nayaks*, *Nayak* rulers of *Madurai*, precursors of present day *Naidus*, the *Nayars* of Kerala, *Reddy's* of Andhra etc. (Chandrsekhar, 1972). What mattered in these cases was the economic and political status and not the ritual status. The subsequent process of hierarchy formation in the Indian society, especially during the British rule was affected under the introduction of new land tenure system which brought in new land relationships of inequalities based on land ownership, hence a new agrarian structure with a hierarchical system. The latter replaced Indian feudalism and *Jajmani* system which represented caste based agrarian relations in which the land belonged to the village as a whole rather than individuals (Desai, 1966). The new system created new classes based on the ownership of land, and the land undoubtedly invariably possessed by the higher castes. Hence, more entrenched inequalities in land relations emerged in rural areas along with increasing dependency relations in the new system which introduced new hierarchies (agrarian classes) and also consolidated the old hierarchies (*Varna and caste*).

### **Caste Hierarchies, Change and Democratization: Rural Himachal Pradesh**

Despite the complexities stated in the beginning of this paper, the erstwhile *Simla Hill States*<sup>2</sup> and Kangra states<sup>3</sup> (Datta, 1997: 3), called old and new Himachal in the recent times, experienced change in the hierarchical orders impinging upon the process of democratization since mid of nineteenth century. A look into the history reveals multiple hierarchies existed at three levels: (1), the officially

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<sup>2</sup>. Bilaspur (Kahlur), Bashahr with feudatories Delath and Khaneti; Nalagarh (Hindur), Keonthal with five Zaildars Koti, Theog, Madhan, Ghund and ratesh; Baghal, Baghat, Jubbal, Kumarsain, Bhajji, Mahlog, Balsan, Dhami, Kuthar, Kunihar, Beja, Darkoti, Tharoch, Sangri, Rawin and Dhadi (Punjab States Gazetteer, (1910), *Simla Hill States*, p. 5, in Datta (1997: 13).

<sup>3</sup>. Kangra, Guler, Gaswan, Detarpur, Siba, Kotlehr, Shahpur, Kullu, Mandi, Suket, Bnaghal, Nurpur, Kotla, and Chamba (H. R. Gupta, *History of the Sikhs*, Vol. III, p. 21, in Datta (1997: 20).

created administrative and political hierarchies created by erstwhile rulers of princely states, British interventions and post-independent Indian State, indicating changing forms; (2), general hierarchical existence based on varna, caste and class and the rural political elite, including those amongst scheduled castes and scheduled tribes; (3), the Scheduled Castes, a group of castes at the bottom of the main social hierarchy but also having hierarchical structure; and (4), similarly scheduled tribes, a racial categories, constituting a strategically located segment of Himachal population, having a caste system signifying hierarchical order within. Despite Buddhism, the tribal belt has *Brahmanical* influences visible in the institutional practices like caste system within tribes.

In the pre-British period, the hierarchical formations were based on the nature and type of affiliations of the castes concerned and the relationships thus revolved around the then given social, economic and political systems.<sup>4</sup> In the Simla hill states, apart from the ruling class, a class of *zamindars* or feudal lords existed which suggested presence of other agricultural classes forming a hierarchy. A feudal lord was “supreme and sole owner of the soil, he issued the right of the cultivator to a share of produce. He was unlike a feudal king, a manorial lord”, (Verma, 1995: 69). Artisans— goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, potters, shop-keepers formed a hierarchy but at the same time they were further divided into high and low categories. Artisans making articles for the rulers were privileged with certain favours along with others, such as priests, state officials, widows, minors old and infirm. They were distinguished as their *families were not to perform begar (unpaid labour) whereas from those artisans who made articles for the general public were made to perform begar*. The then prevailing Beth system— an obligation to render personal service in return for certain cultivating rights.

The hierarchies emerged from two types of land ownership— *ala malquiat*, the land vested in the name of the rulers who invariably represented Thakurs and Rajputs were superior owners, and the other ‘actual owners’ of land identified

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*adna malquiat* were regarded the inferior owners. The land of the former variety was called *basa* or *sohal*. Further, the inferior portion of the *basa* land on the outskirts of the *jagir* was given to the untouchables (*group of castes*), called *Kolis*. In addition to them there were shoemakers, carpenters, *darzis* (tailors), and blacksmiths forming one set of service providers. Another set of such service providers called *bethus* of higher castes included *Kanets* who did not do menial jobs. While both types of *Bethus* formed separate hierarchies but being in the service of the *jagirdar* they were called class I, implying thereby hierarchies within hierarchy. In addition to the said the *Bethus* who provided services to the class I *Bethus*, they were termed class II. There also existed another class of *Bethus*, mainly the borrowers of loans and in return they agreed to supply goods in lieu of interest on the loan. The last category included mainly the *Kolis* (Datta, 1995: 109-117). Such a system amounted to serfdom, indicating feudal mode of production. The position of Brahmin caste remained ambiguous shuttling between their high ritual status and low economic status. Since the priests among Brahmins attached with royalties received favours in cash and kind they enjoyed high prestige in comparison to common Brahmins but being dependent upon the royalties remained next to the Thakur Rajputs and Rajputs. However, Brahmins with land of superior type competed with Thakurs and Rajputs. Such instances have been rare.

One of the important factors worthwhile to mention here is that the hereditary ascription did not only apply to *Rajas* alone but also to *Wajirs* (ministers), territories and titles in the political and administrative set ups in different states, implying caste linked with various positions forming hierarchies which definitely involved power-politics, the dynamics signifying retention of power by those in power by depriving those who do not have power. The opposition and conflicts involving the power elite and the deprived segments, however, remained at low ebb as long as the Thakurs remained unaffected. However, the moment a model policy aiming at providing occupancy rights to *Bethus* was introduced by the British, a kind of relief to cultivators, stiff opposition

arose from Thakurs, on the pretext once the *Bethus* were provided occupancy rights they (*Thakurs*) would lose the ability to evict them from the lands on which the *Bethus* were enjoying only cultivating rights. Such conflicting situations, nevertheless, reflected on the fact that the hierarchies were maintained under a *completely authoritarian system, rationalized with divine theory under which the subjects did not form part of governance* (Verma, 1995: 65) and were totally toothless to fight for their rights.

The pre-British administrative unit, primarily Kingdom, an absolutely centralized authority, despite oppositions was replaced by the decentralized, legal, and hereditary authority, each office enjoying not absolute but limited powers after British interventions. The Superintendent of the hill states introduced a Manager of state, assisted by other functionaries with decentralized powers, to look into state affairs. The judicial and financial powers *controlled by the state and the significant decisions taken by the King became operational only after confirmation by the Superintendent of the hill states*. The process of departure from the hereditary, dynastic rule with a hierarchical system to a constitutional, legalized administration started inducing change in the nature and form of administrative hierarchies too. Subsequently, struggle of the common hill folks against the oppressive and unjust rule of the Princely states with the objective of democratization of the administration led to several protests, culminating into mass movements, like Praja Mandal and general Social Reform, further creating considerable political and social awakening among hill people about their being (Ahluwalia, 1993: 188). Ultimately, the struggle against feudal system by local village leadership further made a dent into the traditional hierarchical system and new leadership from amongst the peasants emerged, remarkably like Dr. Yashwant Singh Parmar, the first Chief Minister of the state which diluted the traditional hierarchical orders.

In this way, historical legacy of absolute power enjoyed by the erstwhile rulers of a cluster of twenty-eight states, among these nine feudatories, identified as States and *Thakurais* (*Baronies signifying title holder of having rendered*



*military or any other honourable service to the royal families*) and sub-feudatories (Datta, 1997: xi), was considerably affected due to British administrative and financial interventions. Resultantly, traditional hierarchical structure of governance, comprising king, his ministers, military chiefs and common subjects under the princely states weakened, and another parallel, rather relatively more powerful administrative system, legally and constitutionally defined governance with a hierarchical authority but with decentralized powers structure, comprising a Deputy Commissioner, Deputy Assistant Commissioner, *Negi or Mukhiya* (village Headman), *Lambardar* (Revenue Collector), *Chowkidars* (watchmen), *Hamaldi* (an untouchable head functionary) and a *Toknya* (menial worker) came into being. Such changes, including the ones in the nature and form of hierarchies had considerable implications for *varna* based stratification system, democratization of political authority and constitutional growth in Himachal Pradesh.

The period 1858 to 1947, indeed, witnessed increasing democratization of institutional structures. Verma (1995: 72-75) referring to the changes taking place in phases observed,

“Between 1858 to 1892 only selected people nominated by government for consultation on legislation matters; 1892 to 1909, instead of nomination the principle of election and representatives of people were consulted on legislation, budget etc.; from 1909 to 1919 non-official majorities introduced in Provincial Councils and election in the Central Legislative Council; from 1919 to 1927, the elected majorities formed part of Provincial Councils; between 1928 to 1935 the recognition of right of the people of the state to self determination like the right people have in whole of India; formation of people’s movement Riasi Praja Mandal in 1939 and its expansion between 1942 to 1945; abolition of rotational *beggar*; and so on”.

Though no self government had come into being till late, nevertheless considerable democratization took place in the hill states as it neared independence.

The post-independent period, with special reference to changes in caste hierarchies and its implications for democracy, is highly critical especially in view of the central and the state government making considerable constitutional,

socio-economic and political inputs aiming at democratization of society right from the grassroots level, decentralization of powers, encouraging people's participation in developmental projects through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), land reforms to bring down disparities in land ownership, affirmative action and other policies and programmes for the amelioration of the conditions of the target groups . The Constitution of India prohibited social and religious disabilities (Article 15), abolished untouchability in any form (Article 17) and opened all the public places to all citizens irrespective of their caste. The Union of India also passed Untouchability Offences Act, 1955 (later Amended in 1976) and the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955. Apart from the two, another act promulgated later The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 aimed at abolishing all types of discriminations and atrocities committed on the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

Himachal Pradesh though acquired statehood almost after 24 years of independence, it resorted to the process of democratization, implemented affirmative action for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and enacted Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act in 1952 and implemented the same in 1954. Ineffective working of the PRIs caused the need for reformulation of the act and consequently the state enacted Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1968 and introduced two tier PRIs in the state. After 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, the state enacted Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1994, which replaced the previous act. The state in line with central government Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Area (PESA) extended the act to its scheduled tribe areas in 1996. The state has 3243 Panchayats with 19411 seats, 75 Panchayat Smitis with 1667 seats, 12 Zila Parishads with 251 seats for a total of 20118 villages (Directorate, 2010). Of the total Gram Panchayat seats 25 percent, 6.20 percent, 7.28 percent and 30.43 percent are reserved for women belonging to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, Other Backward Classes and General Women respectively. Almost similar percentage of seats, with little variation is reserved for women belonging to the above categories for different positions, including

Chairperson/*Pradhan*, Vice Chairperson or *Up-pradan* and members in *Panchayat Samitis* and *Zila Parishad*.

The land reform measures introduced by the state right from the time it acquired an independent identity in 1948 onward did affect some changes in the land disparities. Beginning with Land Reforms Legislations– Restoration of Land 1952, Himachal Pradesh Abolition of Big Landed Estates and Land Reforms act, 1953, Himachal Pradesh (Transferred Territory) Tenants (Protection of Rights Act), 1968, Himachal Pradesh Tenancy and Land Reforms Act, 1972, Himachal Pradesh Ceiling on Land Holding Act, 1972 and Himachal Pradesh Common Land Vesting and Utilization Act, 1974, the state attempted lowering disparities. Resultantly, out of 4,22,145 non-occupancy tenants in the state 3,79,676 became land owners by virtue of conferment of property rights upon them (NIC, 2010). By implication, the political hierarchy starting from the grassroots level, due to reservation of seats now has representation of different segments of population cutting across caste lines. Indeed three different hierarchies have come into being in the rural setting. First, the traditional *varna* and caste based; second, emerging economic classes comprising big land and orchard owners, invariably representing the higher castes; and third, the constitutional and legal authority representing political leadership from grassroots to top political elite. The *varna* and caste hierarchy despite ongoing changes continue to persist along with new hierarchical structures based on class and political representation. The persisting traditional hierarchy is manifested in the form of untouchability, atrocities and traditional hierarchies; resistance to change: perpetuating hierarchies; and limits to change even through political participation.

### ***Untouchability, Atrocities and Traditional Hierarchies***

The existence of discrimination, prejudices, and atrocities against scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, as indicated in the earlier part of this paper, are also substantiated by empirical studies. An exploration (Sharma, 1993) in three districts, namely Shimla, Sirmaur and Hamirpur revealed persistence of *varna* and caste hierarchies restricting socio-cultural interaction– commensal and

connubial as well as perpetuating economic and political inequalities. Another trend of disassociation between the neo-mobile and immobile Dalits is found hampering the process of upward mobility of the latter. Ironically, the tribal community which is different from a caste has been following caste system with *Brahmanical* values (Negi, 1973: Mamgain, 1973), and continues unabated till date. Being rural and gripped by ritualistic traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism tribes in Himachal form hierarchical layers based on purity- pollution ideas.

In the case of scheduled castes, almost 90 percent of them live in rural areas, dependent on primary economic activities they form part of the hierarchical order of agrarian social structure, occupying low position due to their small land holdings, low income and dependency on large land holders from high castes. Though data with regard to Dalit's landholdings is not available but the overall situation in Himachal Pradesh suggests that 68.28 percent constitute marginal farmers with less than 1 hectare of land. The small farmers having land between 1 to 2 acres constitute 18.87 percent, semi-medium 9.94 percent with 2 to 4 acres land, medium 3.11 percent with 4 to 10 acres land and the large with 10 acres and above constitute only 0.3 percent (Economic Survey, HP, 2011: 41). In comparison to 1991 the number of marginal farmers has increased, indication the increasing disparities. The gaps in the percentage of farmers in each category indicate the nature of inequalities in land holdings. Given the position of Dalits in the agrarian economy of the state it is obvious that majority of them are in the marginal and small farmer categories. Their historical social and ecological seclusion coupled with the economic realities signifies persistence of hierarchies and increasing economic inequalities in rural areas of the state. The systematic and deliberate exclusion of the scheduled castes is visible three ways: First, strict operation of varna and caste normative order restricting commensal relationships. Second, endogamy continues to rule the roosts. And third, the place of the Dalits in the agrarian social structure has not changed. A young married scheduled caste woman indicates how the power dynamics and not the

ritual dimension of social reality of caste plays its role in the maintenance of distance and ambivalence,

“Ever since my father-in-law has been elected MLA we are invited by the high castes politicians, bureaucrats and other officers. People belonging to high castes touch the feet of my father-in-law and offer us the best hospitality. However, when the father-in-law is not along with us then in the same family we are treated like the other common persons”.

The distance is not only maintained among the living beings but also carried to the cremation grounds where the high castes do not allow the lower castes to cremate their dead. They are compelled to have separate place. In case of any violation the high caste priest imposes a fine in the form of offering a goat to the priest. What a contradiction the priest accepts the goat but not the human beings.

On the issue of connubial relation, the study revealed while hardly any marital alliance takes place between the scheduled castes and high castes, even within the scheduled castes no such marriage is possible between an untouchable and non-untouchable. A *Chamar* does not marry his son or daughter with daughter or son of a *Chuhra* and vice a versa. Similarly, a *Chamar* does not have marital alliances with *Koli* and vice-versa. The rule of endogamy is followed among high as well as scheduled castes. The endogamous practices in the institutional sphere ensure persistence of hierarchical existence, social distance and restricted social interaction.

In the occupational and political spheres, no doubt, some change is visible due to affirmative action with some of the Dalits moving into the higher order in the hierarchy but the vast majority remains confined to lower levels of occupations. Until recently, scavenging continued to be a reality in state capital Shimla. There are dry latrines which are unlikely to be removed due to little possibility of laying down the sewage lines amidst haphazard growth of downtown and other areas. The work relations in the primary sector of economy reflect not upon the economic inequalities but also constricted life chances for the low caste labourers. The problem of unstructured wages, exploitation of scheduled castes, hidden incidences of bondage constitute some of the social

realities of the economic relationship between the members of distinct hierarchies. The data on regular employment of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Government department is 20.5 percent and 5.8 percent respectively and the number of employees belonging to high castes is roughly 74 percent (DE&SHP, 2010). The majority of the employees from these castes are in class III and IV categories whereas the class I and II positions remain vacant due to want of suitably educated persons from such castes (Sharma, 1982: 49-60; Galanter, 1984: 89; and Radhakrishnan, 1991: 1911-12).

### ***Resistance to Change: Perpetuating Hierarchies***

The mid 1970s witnessed a spate in the protests against extension of reservation beyond the stipulated period of 33 years. The deliberate resistance came from those who feared their children losing chances of getting employment in the future. Their rationale of protests argument was: (i) the economically better off among the scheduled castes have been reaping the benefits and those who are really needy not benefitting; (ii) instead of caste let economic criteria be the basis of reservation so that poor among all castes get the benefit. The latter view even found support from a larger segment of scheduled castes in very poor economic conditions due to the socio-economically better off scheduled castes could not get benefit. Even historically protest and resistance marked Dr. Ambedkar's movement when he voiced his concerns for the emancipation of the scheduled castes in 1931, Gandhi speaking to the *Indian Students Majlis* in London said that he would work from one to another end of India to tell the untouchables that separate electorate and reservation is not the way to remove this bar sinister. The resistance from Gandhi ultimately resulted in Poona Pact of 1932 and made Dr. Ambedkar to denounce Gandhi. He said, "Every one of them has foiled in his mission. Mahatmas come and Mahatmas have gone. But the untouchables have remained untouchables (Isaacs, 1965: 37).

In the 1990s, the then Prime Minister V. P. Singh's implementation of Mandal Commission Recommendations for the OBCs, ignited violent resistance throughout India, including Himachal Pradesh becoming highly volatile. Though

the then Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh publically announced that he would not implement centre's decision in the state even then there was turmoil all around. The schools, colleges, universities, public institutions, transport system, business activities and almost everything came to standstill. The damage to public property, acts like suicides and self- immolation, and violent clashes between the OBCs and the high castes students became intense. The army was called at couple of places and flag march being held here and there became the order. The protests were organized mainly by Brahmans, Rajputs, Khattris, Baniyas, etc. pursuing professional courses. Their rationale to protest was already limited job opportunities in Himachal Pradesh, that too in the public sector, any further addition reserved positions would leave nothing for higher castes. The questioned why should a society aspiring to be socially and politically democratic execute a policy encouraging preferential system? Perhaps, a rationale analysis of the impact the reservation might have it appears the movement was an overt reaction caused by the fear psychosis of losing all chances of getting employment. The study by the author (1990) significantly revealed that those participating in the agitation were not even aware of the real situation. The movement to resist reservation was meant to maintain status quo. It is observed that at times *in such movements the central leadership invokes myths and take support of populism* (Dhanagre, 1989), which to some extent could also be the case anti-Mandal Commission Recommendations' implementation to maintain the existing hierarchical order by the high castes rather than by the real fear of jobs.

### ***Political Participation: Limits to Change***

To what extent the democratization of political institutions, right from grassroots level to the highest level of political representation with increasing participation of Dalits resulted in change in the village power structure and to what extent the scheduled castes have utilized the emerging opportunities to make themselves effective in the political decision making processes in the rural Himachal. While one of the study (Sharma, 1993) revealed considerable number of the scheduled

castes becoming aware of their political rights and privileges accorded to them in the constitution and another other study (Sharma, 2003) indicated that after execution of 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment the Dalits with relatively socio-economically better off background have been able to make a place for themselves in the village power structure. But poor among them have no place in the power structure and they also are not much aware of their rights and privileges. The political participation of the Dalit leadership, in certain cases is commended both by the Dalit as well as non-Dalit leadership and the people at large. The general belief, constructed on the basis of historically perpetuated prejudices and stereotypes that Dalit leadership is inefficient, lacks initiative, does not do anything and acts only under the dictates of high caste party based leadership. While such stereotypical constructions cannot be substantiated in view of Dalit leadership probing their worth on all fronts, but the element of truth is not something true only in the case of Dalit leadership but also found in the case of non-Dalit leadership also.

Another most significant issue whether the voting by the scheduled castes is free from pressures of high caste political leadership, almost all the Dalit leaders accepted considerable political pressure on them. However, they argued that politics is based on the principle of give and take, sharing of power and privileges and pressure is part of the game. They argue that since they live in the villages, easily identifiable and also need help of the high castes in many spheres of their lives it becomes very difficult for them to move independently. The pressure, at times, is to the extent of deciding about which candidate should be fielded even when it pertains to reserved constituencies. It is the high caste political leadership of different parties which decides in most cases.

In the political sphere, due to reserved constituencies, a couple of scheduled castes from the state has entered Lok Sabha and state Vidhan Sabha but their entry is not independent of either Congress or BJP, the two leading political parties of the state. Bhaujan Samaj Party which could have made a difference by capturing a couple of seats in the state legislative assembly failed



miserably. Ironically, BSP found an ex-MLA from Congress and that too a Rajput as its leader. The situation as it stands today's BSP is not even visible in the state. The educated and the economically well placed scheduled castes align themselves more with those in power, mostly the high castes and less with the scheduled castes. Somewhere, power tends to allure those who are in search for an identity. Because of these reasons a sizable population of scheduled castes, even if they have their members in the Panchayats, continue to occupy a subjugated position in the village power structure. The outcome of political liberalization is felt only in the case of those who along with political representation have also made their families educationally and occupationally mobile and also departed from their traditional occupations. Though inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's ideas but they are not ready to leave the Hindu religion and lose their scheduled caste status. They keep the latter intact due to the policy of affirmative action for their benefit. They are also not ready to abandon the domination of caste Hindus in the political sphere and therefore continue to be commanded by them. It has been observed (Sharma, 2003) that there are bottlenecks, such as caste based inter-caste cleavages, intra-caste dissensions arising mainly due to ideological differences, social class formation process among the scheduled castes and resultant disassociations between the Dalit elite and the common masses which hinder consolidation of Dalits as a class in itself and class for itself.

### **Concluding Observations**

The process of change impinging upon hierarchies in Himachal Pradesh indicates that over the decades before and after independence the state has undergone considerable democratization of its socio-economic and political institutions along with increasing participation of the scheduled castes in the political processes. There are doctors, engineers, professors, scientists, bureaucrats, police officers and political leaders (PRI leadership, Member Legislative Assembly and member Parliament) from amongst scheduled castes and scheduled tribes from the state. Do change and mobility in the status of

some of the scheduled castes bring about transformation in the fundamental constituents of the hierarchies and social, economic and political structure of the state dismantling hierarchies, constricting them and elimination of inequalities?

The above raised two questions are highly significant in the caste and democracy context, especially when one refers to persistence of caste system leading to undemocratic society. The two fundamental constituent of hierarchies—caste endogamy and hereditary remain in vogue. While laxity in endogamy result in few non-endogamous class compatible marriages among the high castes, the incidence of marriages between high castes and scheduled castes are very rare. The caste system characterized by religious traditions and rites and rituals continues even today with purity and pollution considerations and practice of untouchability widely persisting. Both the commensal and connubial principles underlying patterns of interaction and social relationships are strictly followed. The traditional hierarchies therefore persist unabated to a considerable extent, especially when even the educated and well placed indulge in discriminatory practices against the scheduled castes.

This is also a fact that the increasing disassociation between the mobile and non-mobile scheduled castes adversely affects the articulation of their interests in the important decision making bodies. The entire system operates through the powerful lobbies and the scheduled castes representatives being divided between different political parties represent the parties concerned more than articulating the interests of the scheduled castes. By implication the mobile scheduled castes by aligning themselves with high caste political leadership help in the persistence of existing hierarchies. This is also one of the reasons that the law enforcing agencies represented by the high castes act in laxity whenever the rights of scheduled castes are violated. These agencies become serious only when the collectivities or the civil society take up the issues more seriously. One of the reasons perhaps also accounting for the laxity by the judiciary, bureaucracy and political leadership in the context of scheduled castes in Himachal Pradesh is that they are ecologically segregated and having no state

level formidable organization to confront the power structure. Hence perpetuation of inequalities and persistence of hierarchies, in which the traditionally Thakur Rajput, Rajput, Brahman, Bania, and others continue to dominate in the social, economic and political spheres what Max Weber (1978) terms class, status and party and Andre Beteille (1963) calls caste, class and power continue to remain the basis of hierarchies and inequalities. This is true in the case of Himachal Pradesh to a considerable extent.

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