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Changing dynamics of Caste politics in the Himachal Pradesh -

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Himachal Pradesh since its formation has been dominated by the leadership emanating from the Khasas of the Sirmour and Mashu Hills. Colonial state has enumerated Khasa tribe as warriors of the hill thus categorising them as Rajputs. Although their cousins in Garhwal were categorised subsequently as Scheduled tribe. Even in Himachal communities living in Kinnaur, Lahaul & Spiti, Pangi and Gaddis of Bharmour also got their tribal status but within these communities also existed the concept of castes and a sense of social differentiation. Now the Trans-Giri region of Sirmour has been witnessing a political mobilisation to gain tribal status from Khasas of this region but the pre-recognized Scheduled Caste community in this region may not feel this movement as just. Democracy and adoption of the constitutional values has led to the great political awareness among the castes like Giraths, Jihirs, Kolis, Chamars, Dumans who were traditionally categorised into less pure and inferior categories in Himachal. Colonial records of the regions can also give a glimpse of the community and caste based mobilisation. The 1925 edition of the **District Gazetteer** mentions an ongoing struggle between the Girths and the Rajputs because the Girths were challenging the restrictions imposed upon them by the Rajputs to claim higher status in the varna hierarchy. This conflict asserted itself in the economic dimension when Girths demanded a better share of the crops which Rajputs landlords were denying. Rajputs started witnessing erosion of their status hierarchy and to balance the scale they reached an agreement with Kolis and in return offered them clean caste status. Kolis always believed in their Kshatriya origin although they accepted the myth of being fallen from grace.¹ These castes were after the 1936 census were categorised into Schedule Caste and after Independence others like Girths were categorised as OBCs due to their related backwardness and pressure of competitive politics. Before independence Kolis of Kangra fought in Lahore High Court their enumeration in SC categories and they had got a decision in their favour and Mandi Koli association also fought their case against inclusion into SC category after the formation of state. But subsequently old generations of Koli leadership faced backlash from the youths of their own community who started enjoying fruits of reservation in jobs, and political representation in SC seats in the Legislative assembly. They chose economic and political grains over alleviating themselves in the ladder of Varna vyavastha which their older generation has fought before the implementation of affirmative action programmes.²

¹ The District Gazetteer of Kangra 1925, pp 173-4; J.P. Parry, The Koli Dilemma

² Lloyd I. Rudolph & Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, The Modernity of Tradition, Political Development in India (1967), Srinivas, M.N. (1966) Social Change in Modern India.

Land reforms of 1952 & 1972 and empowerment of weaker communities-

In the erstwhile princely states land tenures were based on the principle of feudalism and were retrogressive in nature. Problems faced by the subjects of princely states were politically very sensitive issues in Himachal after independence. This can be easily deduced from the fact the main leadership of the state initially came from Praja Mandalists who fought princely states in the pre-independence times. They politically needed to cut the princes to the size in order to develop a new power centre in the state. Himachal Pradesh government with the intentions of ensuring social justice and uniformity in tenancy laws passed Punjab Tenancy (Himachal Pradesh Amendment) Act 1952 and Himachal Pradesh (Tenants) Rights and Restoration Act, 1952. These acts limited the proportion of produce which can be demanded by the landlords from their tenants and made the eviction of the tenants more difficult. Land Reforms Legislation of 1972 conferred the ownership rights on the occupancy tenants in the old Himachal areas and Kismi tenants in the new areas on a land up to one and half acres (irrigated) and three acres (unirrigated area).³

Land reforms of 1972 led to agricultural ownership on the name of peasantry belonging to General, OBCs and SC communities. But OBCs and SCs witnessed the biggest gain in terms of owning arable land of one's own. Along with the introduction of modern education and reservation policy, the land reforms became a great step in politically, economically and socially empowering the weaker castes in Himachal Pradesh. Horticultural land and tea gardens were excluded from this act which has its own negative externalities on the issue of social justice. State government had also tried to solve the issues of landless castes and communities with the **Nautor** (allocation of government land to the landless) policy. This initiation by the Congress government increased the political support for the Congress party in the traditionally backward castes in villages of Himachal. But it cannot be denied that allocation of the Nautor depended upon the sensitivity of the administration to the needy and landless and very often then not political clientelism became much more important factor in this allocation than the fact of eligibility. **The HP Nautor Rules 1968** had been violated and misused can be proved by the fact that 5700 land allottees under this act were asked by the HC of Himachal in **Narinder Lal Negi case** (2015) to surrender their 20 bighas of land because they were government servant at that time or their annual income 1974 was more than 2000 per annum.⁴ But despite all shortcomings it cannot be denied that land reforms and the nautor policy further cemented the pro-poor and social justice oriented image of the Congress party in the politics of Himachal.

Issue of Shamlat land in Sirmour district and other districts-

In the Himachal Pradesh until 1974 pastures, river beds, irrigation channels and wastelands which were part of village forests were managed by the Panchayats for the common benefit of the village communities. Himachal Pradesh in this context followed the laws of the Punjab regarding the maintenance and governance of the common forest land around the villages for grazing and wood collection related purposes. This area was termed as **Shamlat** or **Shamlat-Deh** which is in accordance with the **Punjab Village Common Lands Regulation Act, 1961**.⁵ This Shamlat land was immune from individual appropriation because its nature was communitarian and non-exclusive. But the nature of this land was changed due to the policies of the Union government. In the decade of 1970s India became a signatory to the UN agreement on the protection of the environment in Stockholm. The Union government of India decided to walk on this path of environment protection and for this Himachal Pradesh legislated the **Himachal Pradesh Village Common Land Vesting and Utilisation Act 1974** was passed.⁶ This act resulted in transfer of common lands ownership from the Panchayats to the State government, except lands subjected to partition between individual co-sharers before the date of commencement of this Act. Because of the fear of imminent

³ **Himachal Pradesh Department of Revenue** website accessed on 13 June 2022.

⁴ SC relief for 5,700 nautor land allottees, *The Tribune*, 10 Feb. 2016, Accessed on 13 June, 2022

⁵ Punjab Village Common Lands Regulation Act (1961)

⁶ Himachal Pradesh Village Common Land Vesting and Utilisation Act (Act No. 18 of 1974)

nationalisation of this common land and possibility of gaining personal ownership on this land provided a strong incentive for farmers to partition this common land for personal ownership.

The initial appropriators of this common land were powerful landowners who availed the partition clause from the patwaris and initial occupations were mostly illegal. These illegal individual occupations were regularised due to political patronage in the 1980s. In this case Government policy led to private appropriation of the common resources and this appropriation had a negative impact on the social and political justice in the village community. Dhamla and Chauras villages of Sirmour it was found that out of total sampled households 72 % and 40% have private grasslands. It was also found that in both villages Rajputs had 8 to 6 times more ghasnies than the SC population of the village.⁷ In the wake of recent forward caste especially Rajput political mobilisation in Sirmour *Dalit Shoshan Mukti Manch Sirmour* organized a 13 Panchyat conference at Dadahou where the issue of negligible ownership of Shamlat land by the SC community in Sirmour was raised. It was pointed out that main beneficiaries of Shamlat land allocation have been the powerful forward castes of the district.⁸ Lesser share of the SC community in Shamlat land is also due to the fact that many among them remained landless tenants at the time allocation of these land to the peasants. The basic eligibility criteria for owning a community land is to have one's own land without which a family disqualifies on that criteria. But class differences among the upper-castes also played a very crucial role in the appropriation of Shamlat land and this clearly explains the reason for smaller landholding among the so-called upper castes presently along with the division of landholding among the brothers. This economically weaker section of the forward caste is providing the most potent support for the present demonstrations against SC & ST atrocities and demand for Sawarn Samaj Aayog Andolan. Present depressed -caste based political mobilisation in Sirmour and other districts will politicise such issues of social justice and livelihood security. In Punjab SC communities are also very active in claiming their right to own and cultivate such Shamlat land. With the rapid industrialization of the state, the government has diverted many acres of forest land for new industrial units which at times violates the community ownership of land rights of the people and the SC in general having less ownership of personal land suffer more.

RSS and BJP's new outreach towards the SC castes in Himachal Pradesh-

Traditionally Congress party was looked upon by the castes in the SC community as their natural party and BJP was seen as the party of so called upper castes. RSS through its social outreach and BJP with its political mobilisation has been successful in making a new inroads towards gaining the faith of SC castes in Himachal. In Shimla, Solan and Sirmour districts out of total 17 seats of legislative assembly 6 are reserved for SC candidates. As per the 2011 census SC category comprised more than 30 percent votes in Shimla and Sirmour district. These districts have been traditionally Congress dominated now through outreach towards SC category BJP is trying to establish itself on a much stronger footing. Suresh Kashyap, a prominent SC leader of the Pachhad constituency of Sirmour has been working as the state party president of the BJP in Himachal Pradesh. The BJP government has increased the budgetary provision of the *Scheduled Caste Component Plan* from 11% given in 2007-08 to 25% after coming to power. Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur has pointed at this achievement in many public platforms which gives SC population share in the total planning outlay as per their proportion in the total population of the state.⁹

Meanwhile RSS has started backing leading SC academics and scholars for the higher administrative posts like vice-chancellors in different universities of the state and this has helped in increasing the confidence among the educated section of SC castes in the RSS ' agenda of empowerment of the SC community. Case Prof Sikander Kumar of Himachal Pradesh University presents a very good example of how his rise to the post of Vice -Chancellor of Himachal Pradesh university was taken up despite facing many issues regarding fulfilling the basic requirement of 10 years of service as professor. Subsequently, the promotion of Sikander Kumar to the Rajya Sabha further points towards the strategy to promote SC intellectuals to positions of power. Vice Chancellor of Central University of Himachal Pradesh (CUHP) Prof. Sat Prakash Bansal who is also presently appointed VC of Himachal Pradesh

⁷ Emmanuel Bon, Common Pool Resources and Communal Control: Two Case Studies in Himachal Pradesh, PhD thesis.

⁸ etv.Himachal Pradesh, 9 January 2022.

⁹ Esomsa.hp.gov.in, accessed on 25 June 2022.

university after Prof. Sikander, belongs to the SC community of Hamirpur district. Vice-Chancellor of Atal Medical University in Mandi also belongs to a politically powerful SC family from Solan. Vice-Chancellor of the Himachal Pradesh Technical University (HPTU) Prof. Shashi Kumar Dhiman also belongs to Himachal and represents a SC community. Although there are other institutions being represented or headed by scholars of other categories, the present rise of SC academics to power in the academic institutions on the posts which are political in nature is proof that the caste ceiling of these posts have been broken in the present dispensation. This can also be counter checked by the rising allegations by the opposition parties that appointment in the universities has been done on the basis of ideological and political lines. Although this cannot be denied that traditional BJP-RSS supporting castes and their respective elites are gradually developing a sense of resentment.

Use of NOTA to assert resentment and Political agenda-

During the Mandi Parliamentary re-election, NOTA became one of the important factors in the victory of Congress nominee. In this re-election there were 12,626 NOTA votes as compared to the victory margin of 7,490 of the winning congress candidate and incumbent BJP government faced the resentment of different sections.¹⁰ Dev Bhumi Khastriya Sangathan exhorted its members and forward castes to show their presence by using this option because they believed parties had failed in protecting the genuine interests of the category castes. Highest proportion of NOTA was found in SC reserve Legislative assemblies which come under Mandi Parliamentary like Balh, Nachan. Historically the 17 SC reserve seats out of the total 68 seats have not been reshuffled for a long time. Residents of such seats which belong to other castes are resenting that they have been constantly denied their right to contest elections while SC community residing in the non-reserved seats have been denied from availing the benefit of reservation in their respective constituencies. While most candidates of the Non-SC seats have vested interests in keeping their seats unreserved because shifting of reserve seats after five years means ending of political careers for many heavyweights. This has also fuelled resentment against reserved SC seats in many constituencies. For example Gangu Ram Musafir had won five times consequently from Pachhad seats and recently he has been defeated by BJP's Suresh Kasyhap. This particular seat has been reserved for the past 30 years. In the Karsog seat of Mandi Mansa Ram ji has contested nine elections from this reserved seat.¹¹ Lack of reshuffling in SC reserved seats has cost many assembly constituencies from having leadership of other communities while in many non-reserved constituencies SC community leadership has been kept waiting for their chances.

Besides this even on non-reserved seats like Kullu, Mandi sadar, Joginder nagar and tribal kinnaur also witnessed NOTA. It cannot be denied that intra-party conflicts, resentments of JBTS and NPS employees culminated in the tally of NOTA. But it cannot be denied that Dev Bhumi Khastriya Sangathan has openly demanded the use of NOTA to show the collective strength of the general category. NOTA had played a very crucial role in the overall context of the victory of Congress candidate Pratibha Devi Singh who would not have tasted victory if these votes would have gone to BJP. Dev Bhoomi Khastriya Sangathan had given an open call to use NOTA option to present their resentment against the Modi government decision to amend the Supreme Court direction in the Prevention of Atrocities Act. This is the first time that BJP has faced a backlash from its traditional voters of Forward castes. This became crucial with ever increasing RSS and BJP's outreach towards the SC community in the state and national level politics.

Reassertion of the Dev Bhomi Khastriya Sangathan or forward castes in Himachal Pradesh-

BJP and RSS's conscious attempt to make an outreach towards different SC castes on the national and Himachal Pradesh in particular is witnessing a backlash especially in the Himachal Pradesh. Modi government's decision to reverse the Supreme Court's decision which stressed the need to change the arrest procedures in the **Prevention of Atrocities Against SC and ST Act**. BJP did not want to be seen as a political party which is apathetic to the protection of these weaker communities. But in Himachal an organization Dev Bhomi Khastriya Sangathan organised a protests against the discriminatory arrest procedure in the atrocities act which is applied against people of General category and OBCs. This act ensures the arrest of the accused even before a primary inquiry into the culpability of the accused.

¹⁰ NOTA votes proves decisive in Mandi, Pratibha Chauhan, 2 November 2021, accessed 24 June 2022.

¹¹ Chitleen K. Sethi, Age no bar for contesting elections in Himachal Pradesh, theprint.in 23 Oct. 2017 accessed 27 June 2022.

Then subsequently this movement started demanding the creation of **Sarva Samaj Aayog** or *Commission for the Forward Classes* for the protection of economic, political and social interests of the castes presently categorised as Forward or Upper castes. Initially Himachal's Jai Ram Thakur (BJP) government which is dominated by the Rajputs elites tried to undermine this demand. BJP found such mobilisation very counterproductive for its political fortunes because support to the forward caste movement would be seen as anti-schedule caste. But gradually this movement for the creation of Savarna Aayogya became more powerful and a large mobilisation happened at the Dharmashala during the winter session of state legislature in 2021. The Himachal Pradesh government buckled under the pressure of this movement and the Commission was created for the General Castes.¹² But the Sawarna Samaj organisation and Rajput Sabha leaders were subsequently tried for vandalism of public property. Prominent leaders of the movement Rumeet Singh Thakur were arrested and sent to prison after they blocked roads in Shimla and clashed with police. Even before that this political movement witnessed conflict of opinion regarding formulation of the political party to represent sawarna samaj. Many leaders opposed direct participation of General Category into the political system by creating political parties. This clearly depicts the inner fault lines within this movement and also depicts the resentment oriented nature of this movement.

Kullu Legislative Assembly Case (BJP Candidate)-

In November 2012 assembly election in Himachal Pradesh Kullu seat witnessed a very unique circumstance which created a possibility for changing power sharing between the elites belonging to different castes. Popular BJP leader Kullu Maheshwar Singh belonging to the line of former rulers developed a difference with the CM Prem Kumar Dhumal and Pandit Khimi Ram of Kullu (Deputy speaker of that time) and decided to create a new party named Himachal Lokhit Party. BJP was left scouting the candidate to contest in the election and the name of Mr. Ram Singh belonging to RSS background was proposed. Mr Ram Singh belonged to the ST&SC community and had a great reputation among the RSS pracharaks of that time. Numerically SC constituted approximately 28 percent of the Kullu district's total population of that time. Although Maheshwar Singh posted victory on Himachal Lokhit Party's ticket and Ram Singh finished third behind Congress candidates, this election marked the formal recognition of Ram Singh as a popular leader of BJP in Kullu.¹³ His capacity to capture traditional SC votes of Congress became another extra quality he had as compared to any other candidate. Although Maheshwar Singh returned to BJP in the next election and was given a party ticket in the assembly election, he couldn't win this time. This further dented his position within the party beside the label of turncoat also went against him. New CM Jai Ram Thakur and Cabinet minister from Kullu district (Manali seat) Govind Thakur didn't have good rapport with him. Govind Thakur and his father late Kunj Lal Thakur were seen by Maheshwar as a new challenger to his dominant position in the entire district. Ram Singh was chosen over Maheshwar Singh to become *vice-chairperson of HPMC*. Ram Singh has been successful in making inroads into SC population in the constituency and by fulfilling their many demands and creating his parallel supporters vis a vis Maheshwar Singh. He has kept his tussle with Maheshwar Singh to regain influence within parties decision making in Kullu constituency. This tussle has cost BJP dearly in the Panchayat and Municipal Elections. On the other side Congress MLA Sunder Singh Thakur has emerged as a more stronger leader and many forward castes see him as an alternative to Maheshwar Singh who could protect their legitimate interests. There is a possibility that if Mr Ram Singh attains the BJP Ticket in 2022 assembly elections then many non-ideologically committed forward castes will not vote for Ram Singh and many will cast NOTA because they would see it as sacrifice of General seat to SC candidate which would directly challenge the hitherto dominant position of forward classes. Although Ram Singh's ability to make inroads into the traditionally Congress party vote bank of SC community cannot be undermined if such a contest happens.

Sanskritization and new claims to Backwardness in the eyes of state-

Many castes which were traditionally categorised as shudras in the verna hierarchy have been successful in Himachal uplifting their social status with the adoption of Sanskritization process. Harold Gould writes that the motivating force behind Sanskritization is often not one of cultural imitation per se, but an

¹² Himachal Pradesh to set up general category commission, m.timesofindia.com, 11 December, 2021, retrieved 13 June 2022.

¹³ Times of India, Feb 27, 2019 accessed 25 June 2022.

expression of challenge and revolt against social-economic deprivation.¹⁴ Dhimans of lower Himachal have uplifted their social stature with the adoption of *Anuloma* marriages and following the Hindu rituals of purity. This sanskritization has gained traction with the benefits of modern education and reservation policies. Kumar, Teli, Lohar communities have been more successful in adopting the process of Sanskritization. Koli community has again reclaiming their ancient presumed status of Kshatriyas by adopting the surnames of Chahuan. While in the case of traditional shoe making community Azzad surname has been the mark of rebellion against their categorization as the most degraded caste but the community as whole has accepted the hindu rituals of purity and had given up beef eating. The Khasas of the hill has also adopted the process of Sanskritization because their traditional lifestyles did not confirmed to the purity norms of the Hindu religion especially meat eating and polyandry.¹⁵

Bhats (of Sirmour), Acharyas of kullu and Mahants (kullu, mandi) despite being categorised as a Brahmin (of lowly ritual purity) were able to claim backwardness and gain OBC status. Although these communities never faced caste based discriminations. 14th Backward panchayats of Drang constituency of mandi were declared OBC, Khasas and kolis were given the chance to avail this claim to backwardness. Recently Dodra Kwar region of Shimla, Malana of Kullu and Bara-Bhangal of kangra were declared OBC. This creates new OBC out of the traditional Khasas who socially recognized themselves as rajputs or brahmins and kolis& chamar are already under SC list. Pangal and Gaddis were successful in calming tribal status although they socially claim the status of kshatriyas and brahmin while wreckers are categorised as Shudra. Demand of Hati community of backward trans-giri region has to be seen from this prism. Indian politics is witnessing this trend towards claiming backwardness in front of state by former dominant castes and communities.

Conclusion -

There is a need to further study and analyse the historical and present caste relations in Himachal society and politics. In the past seven decades caste based discrimination has not been abandoned completely in Himachal but it cannot be denied that caste relations and power structures has definitely witnessed a change for better. Modern political institutions like parties, pressure groups and changes in the traditional professions have played a crucial role in transforming the society. Democracy and electoral mobilisation has created a sense of awareness among the backward castes and forwards has also witnessed the importance of values of equality and rights. Author believes that if caste based politics happens overtly in Himachal that will hasten the issue of social reforms and end of caste based discrimination. On the other side it will also point out the anomalies which the reservation system creates in the name of social justice. Most important factor is the politicalization of caste so that different perspectives on these issues should collide and help in developing a better understanding of the reality.

¹⁴ Sanskritization and Westernisation - A Dynamic View, Harold Gould. scribed.com

¹⁵ Asaf Sharabi, Sanskritization of the Upper Castes; The Case of Mahasu Followers, July 2018.