

Echoes of Untouchability in Shimla and Kangra, Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract: The caste system in India has historically dictated social norms and relationships, reinforcing structural inequalities that impede the progress of marginalized communities. Since ancient times, the ‘Shudras,’ now constitutionally recognized as Scheduled Castes, have been positioned at the lowest rung of the varna hierarchy and subjected to untouchability—practices that persist despite legal prohibitions. This research examines the prevalence and manifestations of untouchability in the Shimla and Kangra districts of Himachal Pradesh, comparing the social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions of caste-based exclusion in these regions. Using primary data collected through structured interviews with selected respondents, the study reveals that untouchability remains deeply embedded in local traditions across both districts. However, findings indicate that caste-based discrimination is more pervasive and overt in Shimla than in Kangra. The study underscores the urgent need for targeted policy interventions, grassroots advocacy, and community-led initiatives to dismantle entrenched caste hierarchies. By situating its analysis within the broader framework of democratic governance and social justice, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on caste dynamics in contemporary India. It offers actionable insights aimed at fostering an inclusive society where equality and dignity transcend caste-based divisions.

Keywords: Untouchability, Caste-Based Discrimination, Social Exclusion, Cultural Traditions, Social Justice, Inclusive Society.

1. Introduction

Indian society deeply embeds the caste system, which shapes social structures, cultural conventions, and daily interactions. It influences access to resources, economic opportunities, and social mobility, often perpetuating historical inequalities. Caste-based discrimination is still a problem, even though laws are being passed to stop it. It shows up as subtle bias in the workplace and outright exclusion in religious and social settings. Jayaram (1996) highlights that the ideological foundation of the caste system can be traced back to Hindu scriptures and legal texts, such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Dharmashastra*. The different levels of *jatis* (endogamous descent groups) and *varnas* (ranked classifications of *jatis*) in Hinduism were explained. Each group was also told what their religious duties were, which were called *jatidharma* and *varnadharma*. Over time, this association between Hinduism and caste reinforced the perception of caste hierarchy as a divinely sanctioned order. Similarly, Dumont (1980) asserts that caste is not just a social fact but a deeply rooted ideological construct that continues to structure Indian society.

Recognizing the entrenched nature of caste discrimination, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar introduced constitutional provisions aimed at eradicating untouchability and promoting social equality through affirmative action (Jaffrelot, 2003). However, as Thorat and Joshi (2020) observe, caste-based discrimination—including untouchability—remains widespread despite these legal safeguards. This persistence underscores the limitations of modern legal frameworks in dismantling deeply ingrained social hierarchies. In rural areas, where traditional practices remain strong, Scheduled Castes continue to experience systemic exclusion and caste-based violence, highlighting the enduring nature of caste oppression. Himachal Pradesh provides a significant case study for examining these issues, as its communities strongly adhere to traditional rituals and local power structures that often reinforce caste hierarchies and social inequalities. To explore this phenomenon empirically, this study focuses on two districts.

Scholars emphasize the importance of understanding how cultural and social practices perpetuate discrimination and stress the need for comprehensive and effective strategies to dismantle caste-based exclusion, fostering a more inclusive society.

2. Objectives of the Research

1. To analyze the persistence of untouchability practices in contemporary Himachal Pradesh and examine the socio-cultural factors contributing to their continuation.
2. To identify actionable suggestions and provide recommendations for dismantling caste-based untouchability and fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

3. Literature Review

The caste system's historical and structural significance has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry. Ambedkar (1946) contended that caste is not just a social hierarchy, but a systemic mechanism that perpetuates inequality and oppression. Jodhka and Shah (2010), highlight the persistence of caste hierarchies in both rural and urban settings, where access to education, healthcare, and employment remains deeply influenced by caste identity. Jayal and Mehta (2010) provide a broader political perspective, demonstrating how caste-based discrimination is institutionalized within Indian democracy. Similarly, Omvedt (2012) traces the evolution of caste from ancient to modern times, emphasizing the transformative role of social reformers like Ambedkar in challenging its foundations. Deshpande (2014) addresses the persistent problem of caste through a sociological lens, while Moffatt (2015) examines the consensus and structure within untouchable communities in South India. Jodhka (2015) revisits caste in contemporary India, emphasizing its adaptive yet oppressive mechanisms in modern society. Within the specific context of Himachal Pradesh, Sehgal (2014) critiques the paradox of the state being regarded as *Dev Bhumi* (Land of the Gods), where spiritual ideals coexist with entrenched caste-based inequalities.

Jodhka's (2015) study *Cast(e) on the Hill* is particularly relevant to this research, as it explores the interplay of divine power, social cohesion, and hierarchy in Himachal Pradesh. Sharma (2016) examines both historical and contemporary realities of Dalits in rural Himachal, underscoring the enduring nature of caste-based discrimination. Thorat and Joshi (2020) further document the continued practice of untouchability across India, offering insights particularly relevant to the social dynamics of every Indian state. Kumar and Kumar (2022) analyze the Hatti community's push for tribal status and the Swarna Aayog Movement in Himachal Pradesh. They show how these movements express upper-caste worries about reservation policies and changing social and political dynamics. The authors argue that these movements represent an effort to preserve historical privileges amid changing caste equations. Kumar and Negi (2024) analyze the structure and function of the Khumli system among traditional elites in the Giripar region of Sirmaur, Himachal Pradesh. They demonstrate how the Khumli system perpetuates caste divisions and marginalizes Dalits and women in society.

This study builds upon these existing frameworks by specifically analyzing the persistence of untouchability in Himachal Pradesh, with a comparative focus on the Shimla and Kangra districts. It tries to give a more complete picture of how localized cultural practices and social structures keep caste-based unfairness going by looking at differences in how caste works in different regions. Despite modernization and legislative interventions, untouchability remains a lived reality for many Scheduled Castes in Himachal Pradesh. Through this investigation, the study aims to add to the larger conversation about caste in modern India by highlighting the need for ongoing social reform and policy changes to fix these long-standing problems.

4. Research Methodology

This empirical study examines the persistence of untouchability practices in Himachal Pradesh, with a specific focus on the Kangra and Shimla districts, using a combination of primary and secondary data sources. To collect primary data, the researcher conducted a structured survey between January 2021 and January 2023, administering well-designed interview schedules to residents across these districts. A multi-stage random sampling method was employed to ensure a diverse and representative sample, encompassing individuals of varying ages, income levels, and caste backgrounds. The study sampled a total of 300 participants, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of

social patterns and lived experiences related to untouchability. Incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research methods, this study provides a holistic understanding of how untouchability practices persist and evolve within different socio-economic and cultural contexts in Himachal Pradesh.

5. Analysis and Finding

This study investigates the continuity of untouchability in Himachal Pradesh, particularly within the Shimla and Kangra districts, by examining the intersection of caste, religion, and cultural traditions. To achieve the study’s objectives, the researcher designed a set of targeted questions aimed at capturing the ground realities of caste-based discrimination in the selected districts. These questions provided deeper insights into the social hierarchies and discriminatory practices that shape everyday life.

5.1. The Denial of Dalit Entry in the Deity Temples

The denial of Dalit entry into deity temples is not merely a cultural or religious issue but a significant manifestation of systemic caste-based exclusion. These practices are most prevalent in rural areas of India, where traditions tied to purity and pollution dominate social and spiritual life.

Table. 1: Respondents' Views on Temple Entry for Different Castes

Different Castes Entry in the Temple	Shimla		Kangra	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes	23	23.0	167	83.5
No	64	64.0	25	12.5
No Response	13	13.0	8	4.0
Total	100	100.0	200	100.0

Source: Field Survey.

Table 1 highlights deep regional contrasts—while 83.5 percent of respondents in Kangra support temple entry for individuals from all castes, only 23 percent in Shimla share this view. A significant 64 percent of respondents in Shimla oppose caste inclusivity in temples, reflecting the district’s adherence to traditional and exclusionary norms. In contrast, Kangra’s greater openness can be attributed to urbanization, external influences, and socio-political reforms that have fostered a more inclusive outlook.

5.2. The Role of Village Deities in Perpetuating Caste-Based Divisions

Village deities in rural India, particularly in regions, often play a significant role in perpetuating caste-based divisions. These deities are deeply embedded in the social and religious fabric of local communities, and their temples or sacred spaces are frequently associated with caste purity.

Table 2 shows that in Shimla, 38 percent of respondents agreed and 22 percent strongly agreed that the role of village deities (Devatas) reinforces caste hierarchies. In Kangra, only 32 percent agreed and 24 percent strongly agreed, which is a slightly lower percentage. Notably, a larger share of respondents in Kangra disagreed or strongly disagreed (19.5 percent and 12 percent, respectively), suggesting a more diverse perspective influenced by socio-cultural changes.

Table. 2: The Role of Village Deities in Perpetuating Caste-Based Divisions

Opinion of Respondents	Shimla		Kangra	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	22	22.0	24	12.0
Disagree	10	10.0	39	19.5

Neutral	8	8.0	25	12.5
Agree	38	38.0	64	32.0
Strongly Agree	22	22.0	48	24.0
Total	100	100.0	200	100.0

Source: Field Survey.

Based on the above analysis, it is evident that caste-based divisions remain prevalent due to the strong influence of deity institutions on society. A 28-year-old Dalit boy in Munish Panchayat, Shimla, shared his perspective with the researcher, stating:

“The majority of social and religious occasions for our caste members are arranged so that we sit in separate rows. Furthermore, the temple’s main idol is off-limits to us.

This statement reflects the persistent influence of caste-based practices, indicating that, even in the 21st century, the legacy of ancient caste divisions continues to shape social and religious interactions in some communities. Despite significant societal progress, such practices reveal that caste-based discrimination remains entrenched in certain areas of life.

5.3. Inter-Caste Marriages and Deity Beliefs

The society’s insights on inter-caste marriages reflect deep-rooted social and religious beliefs that continue to shape matrimonial choices. Table 3 indicates a stark contrast between Shimla and Kangra districts regarding the role of deity beliefs in opposing inter-caste marriages. In Shimla, 66 percent of respondents (16 percent agree, 50 percent strongly agree) believe that all caste people (Dalit and non-Dalit communities) oppose inter-caste marriages due to religious restrictions and the fear of offending deities. In contrast, only 24.5 percent of respondents in Kangra share this view, with 17 percent agreeing and 7.5 percent strongly agreeing. On the other hand, opposition to this belief is significantly stronger in Kangra, where 62 percent of respondents disagree or strongly disagree (32.5 percent disagree, 29.5 percent strongly disagree), compared to only 29 percent in Shimla (4 percent disagree, 25 percent strongly disagree). These results show that religious and traditional caste-based rules are stronger in Shimla, while Kangra is less strict about marriages between different castes or groups. This difference shows how the two districts’ social and cultural dynamics are different, with Kangra being more open to breaking caste barriers in marriage.

Table. 3 Respondent Insights on the Intersection of Inter-Caste Marriages and Deity Beliefs

All caste people are not in favour of inter-caste Marriages due to village Deity culture	Shimla		Kangra	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	25	7.0	59	29.5
Disagree	4	4.0	65	32.5
Neutral	5	5.0	27	13.5
Agree	16	16.0	34	17.0
Strongly Agree	50	50.0	15	7.5
Total	100	100.0	200	100.0

Source: Field Survey.

5.4. Caste and Commensality: Food Sharing in Village Marriage Rituals

The food sharing or the denial of food sharing during marriage ceremonies is a critical practice that reflects and reinforces caste-based divisions in rural communities. In many villages, marriage ceremonies are not only personal or family events but also serve as a display of social status, cultural values, and caste identity. Caste-based norms often strictly govern the rules around food sharing during such events.

Table. 4: Attitudes of Respondents Toward Food Sharing during Village Marriages

Opinion of Respondents	Shimla		Kangra	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Only certain caste groups share cooked food exclusively among themselves	27	27.0	58	29.0
Members of all castes share cooked food among themselves	17	17.0	78	39.0
Except for common practices like dining together and sharing drinking water, only a few items are exchanged and shared.	56	56.0	64	32.0
Total	100	100.0	200	100.0

Source: Field Survey.

Table 4 reflects that in Kangra, 39 percent of respondents reported that members of all castes share food, suggesting a more open social atmosphere, whereas only 17 percent in Shimla observed such inclusivity. Additionally, 56 percent of respondents in Shimla indicated that food sharing is limited to specific items, excluding common dining and drinking water, compared to 32 percent in Kangra. These results demonstrate that Kangra has made significant progress in dismantling caste-based barriers in communal areas than Shimla.

5.5. Dietary Taboos in Dalit Matrimonial Ceremonies

Food taboos in Dalit marriage ceremonies reflect deep-seated caste-based restrictions and social hierarchies that continue to influence traditional practices. In many regions of Indian states, particularly in rural areas, certain food items are either restricted or consumed separately due to caste norms. Upper-caste guests often refuse to eat Dalit-prepared food, resulting in segregated dining arrangements or the hiring of upper-caste cooks to cater to their preferences. This study examines whether discrimination exists based on food taboos in Dalit marriage ceremonies.

Table. 5 Promoting Inter-Caste Harmony: Non-Dalits Cooking at Dalit Weddings

Opinion of Respondents	Shimla		Kangra	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Never	7	7.0	58	29.0
Rarely	15	15.0	41	20.5
Sometimes	17	17.0	51	25.5
Often	11	11.0	33	16.5
Frequently	50	50.0	17	8.5
Total	100	100.0	200	100.0

Source: Field Survey.

Table 5 highlights regional differences in perceptions regarding the prevalence of non-Dalits cooking food at Dalit weddings to enable participation from different castes. In Shimla, 50 percent of respondents reported that this practice was common, reflecting the district's strong adherence to caste-based norms. In contrast, only 8.5 percent of respondents in Kangra observed this practice frequently, while 29 percent stated it never happened, indicating a shift toward inclusivity.

6. Results and Discussions

The analysis reveals that caste-based discrimination persists in Himachal Pradesh, manifesting in various forms

such as temple entry restrictions, food taboos, and marriage practices. Despite legal safeguards, caste-based exclusion remains deeply ingrained in social structures, particularly in rural areas. Several incidents highlight the extent of this discrimination, as documented in newspaper reports and scholarly studies.

One such case occurred in the Nerwa area of Chopal, Shimla district, where a 24-year-old Dalit man was brutally assaulted and killed by three upper-caste youths. The conflict began over a minor traffic issue—when the Dalit man was unable to give way on a narrow market road, the assailants, angered by the delay, overtook his vehicle and physically attacked him (The Times of India, 2018). A home guard jawan intervened, allowing the victim to continue his journey, but the attackers pursued him to the Dundi temple, where they assaulted him again. His injuries proved fatal, and he succumbed at the Nerwa hospital. The case was registered under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, leading to the arrest of the three accused, aged 17, 19, and 20 (Dheer, 2018). This incident underscores how caste identity continues to be a catalyst for violence, transforming an everyday dispute into a fatal expression of social hierarchy. It serves as a stark reminder of the systemic discrimination that Dalit individuals still endure in their daily lives.

Kangra district, though relatively more progressive, is not exempt from caste-based discrimination. Jodhka (2016), in his article "Caste on Hill," notes that caste consciousness remains deeply entrenched in Kangra, even flourishing in contemporary times. Despite Dalits constituting nearly 30% of the population, they wield little political influence. The district's power structures are dominated by Rajputs, who control decision-making processes and continue to marginalize Dalit leadership. Even when Scheduled Caste candidates are elected in reserved constituencies, their authority remains largely symbolic, as real political control is exercised by upper-caste patrons. Furthermore, caste-based hierarchy is reflected in local administration, where government officials often ignore SC representatives and only act when an upper-caste leader intervenes.

Additionally, caste consciousness among Kangra's youth has intensified rather than diminished. Many openly identify by caste names as a matter of pride, reinforcing social hierarchies and further alienating Dalit communities. This environment of caste assertion and dominance fosters intimidation and exclusion, preventing the emergence of independent Dalit leadership. Jodhka's observations highlight how caste-based inequalities in Kangra remain institutionalized, leaving Dalits politically and socially dependent.

A particularly striking case of caste-based spatial exclusion was reported in the Chhota Bhangal region of Kangra district, where a Dalit man was fined by a local deity's committee for walking on a so-called 'sacred path'. This incident reflects how religious customs are used to reinforce caste boundaries, restricting Dalit mobility and access to public spaces. Sukhdev Vishwapremi, national convener of the *People's Campaign for Socio and Economic Equity in the Himalayas*, highlights another critical issue—inaccessibility. He explains that many Dalits refrain from reporting caste-based atrocities because it takes officials days to reach their villages, making justice slow and inaccessible. He further points out that land ownership remains a major barrier to Dalit empowerment in Himachal Pradesh. Dalits own only 2% of the state's total irrigated land, which itself accounts for just 17% of the total cultivable land. This structural marginalization forces them into economic dependence on upper castes, perpetuating their social subjugation (The Times of India, 2022).

These real-life examples of untouchability and caste-based discrimination reinforce the argument that caste hierarchy remains a persistent social reality in Himachal Pradesh. Whether through violence, political exclusion, religious restrictions, or economic marginalization, caste continues to dictate the social fabric of both Shimla and Kangra. While Kangra appears more open to social change, deeply embedded caste biases still prevent full equality, underscoring the need for continued legal and social reform to challenge and dismantle these entrenched discriminatory practices.

7. Conclusion and Policy Implication

Despite constitutional safeguards and legal prohibitions, the echoes of untouchability continue to shape the lived realities of Dalit communities in the Shimla and Kangra districts of Himachal Pradesh. This research underscores that caste-based discrimination is not merely a relic of the past but an enduring social reality, deeply woven into religious traditions, public spaces, and everyday interactions. Caste-based exclusion can be seen in both districts, but it is more obvious and rigid in Shimla, especially in religious and social practices, where Dalits are still

separated and limited. The persistence of food taboos, temple entry prohibitions, and exclusionary customs reflects the entrenched nature of caste hierarchies in the region.

In contrast, Kangra, though not entirely free from caste-based biases, demonstrates a relatively more progressive social environment, with greater openness to challenging discriminatory practices. However, isolated incidents—such as caste-based violence in Shimla's Nerwa area and the "sacred path" exclusion in Chhota Bhangal—serve as stark reminders that caste oppression still finds new forms of expression, even in the 21st century. The denial of access to common spaces, the practice of separate seating in public gatherings, and barriers to inter-caste marriages reveal that untouchability, though legally abolished, persists as a social reality.

The findings suggest that Shimla's adherence to traditional and exclusionary norms contrasts sharply with Kangra's relative openness, shaped by urbanization, external influences, and sociopolitical reforms. However, neither district is free from caste-based discrimination, underscoring the need for systemic change.

To dismantle caste-based discrimination, a multipronged approach is necessary—one that combines strict legal enforcement with grassroots social reform, community-led advocacy, and widespread education. Policies alone cannot eradicate untouchability unless there is a collective will to challenge deep-seated prejudices. Bridging historical injustices requires fostering awareness, amplifying Dalit voices, and ensuring that democratic values of equality and dignity transcend entrenched caste barriers.

Finally, this study contributes to the broader discourse on caste and social justice by emphasizing that true progress requires not just legislative measures but a fundamental shift in societal attitudes and behaviors. Only through sustained efforts in education, policy implementation, and community engagement can we dismantle the enduring remnants of untouchability and move toward a truly inclusive and caste-free society—where dignity and equality are not privileges but universal rights for all.

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