

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT SOCIOLOGY & HUMANITIES



ISSN 2277 – 9809 (online)

ISSN 2348 - 9359 (Print)

An Internationally Indexed Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

www.IRJMSH.com
www.isarasolutions.com

Published by iSaRa Solutions

The Caste Conundrum in Himachal: A Quiet Storm beneath the Calm Hills

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Himachal Pradesh is often referred to as the “Dev Bhoomi”, land of the gods, of snow-kissed peaks, wholesome villages, and smiling Pahadi warmth. But if one listens carefully, beneath the clinking temple bells and tourist chatter, there is another story muttering in the shadows. A story of whispered hierarchies, silent exclusions, and an uncomfortable truth. Caste in Himachal is not a relic of the past, it is a living system, politely denied yet meticulously practiced.

Let us begin at government schools, places that supposedly embody innocence. In many rural classrooms, equality is taught in civics textbooks while inequality is rehearsed at lunchtime. In many districts, children sit segregated as they eat the midday meal, not by height or age or house colour, but by caste. The same hands that write essays on constitutional morality are quietly instructed where they may sit, drink water, or sometimes, from whom they may be served. It is here that discrimination graduates early, even before children do.

Travel a little further into village life, and you find that caste does not merely shape social behaviour, it choreographs death itself. Different communities often have different ‘shamashaan ghats’ (separate cremation grounds), because even ashes must remember hierarchy. In life, pathways are divided and in death, the very smoke must rise from designated spaces. Temples too, the grand shrines of devotion, remain subtly selective. Access may technically be open, but practices, rituals, and unwritten etiquette quietly determine whose faith is considered purer and whose devotion must stand at the margins. The gods, it appears, have entry rules.

Yet to frame Himachal as a simple story of oppression alone would be intellectually and morally wrong. The reservation policies have undeniably changed the social landscape. Many Scheduled Caste and Dalit families have accessed education, secured employment and social assertion that was once unimaginable. In many villages, the once unheard of have become the educated, the employed, the articulate. This upward mobility has unsettled old power equations. The gaze of pity has been replaced by a gaze of discomfort. Equality, as it turns out, is easy to preach but far harder to tolerate when it begins to dent inherited privilege.

Meanwhile, a parallel anxiety haunts the hills of Himachal, a troubling surge of substance abuse. Ironically, with traditional social dominance eroding and economic aspirations clashing with reality, escapism seems to have found a willing audience. Drugs are not only a health issue here; they are a sociological symptom. They expose a vacuum of ambition, and grounded identity, among sections accustomed to inherited status rather than earned resilience. The tragedy is that addiction in Himachal no longer “happens to others” and is haunting promising futures. This,

however, is a problem rampant across the region and transcends the barriers of social dynamics and requires heavy administrative checks and punitive measures.

So, what are we left with? A state caught in an uncomfortable transition. On one hand, progressive policy has enabled mobility and on the other, deeply embedded prejudice still dominates social spaces. Himachal remains that well-mannered student who knows all the right answers but secretly refuses to do the homework. They boast of literacy yet practice social illiteracy. They worship divinity yet deny humans dignity. They celebrate tourism yet hide social fractures behind picture-postcard scenery.

The most dangerous aspect of the Himachal caste conundrum is not loud violence. It is polite exclusion, silent segregation, and normalized prejudice. No slogans. No riots. Just centuries-old hierarchy gently maintained with cultural charm. And because it does not scream, it is easier to ignore.

But silence is not peace. What simmers eventually boils.

If Himachal truly wants to call itself progressive, it must begin by acknowledging what lies beneath the polite surface. Schools must become not just centres of learning, but laboratories of equality where children eat together not because they are forced to, but because they never learn to differentiate in the first place. Temples and community spaces must actively dismantle exclusion rather than rely on passive openness. Conversations around reservation should evolve beyond resentment into reflection and ask questions like why it was needed, and what enabled it. And the drug crisis must be addressed with honest engagement to address youth despair, unemployment, and the psychological realities of a rapidly changing social order.

Himachal is at crossroads. It can either continue smiling for tourist brochures while nursing uncomfortable truths in private or it can confront them boldly, intellectually, and compassionately. A just society is not built by deeply embedded rituals-it is built by moral courage. And perhaps the true “Dev Bhoomi” will emerge not when every hill has a temple, but when every citizen has dignity without footnotes, conditions, or invisible seating arrangements.



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