

Research Article

Hali Dalits' Transformation: An Ethnographic Account of Mangli Panchayat Dalits of Chamba in Himachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

This study reports transformation taking place in Hali Dalits at Mangli Panchayat of Chamba District of Himachal Pradesh through for the last 10 years. The Dalit community is presently living a better respectful life than it was living before 10 years and the community is far better and equitable compared to other Dalit communities in the country, thus making a special case to report. The assertions are made through various incidents and empirical inputs taken place in the area.

Keywords: Cultural mobility, Dalits, Hali Dalits, Social transformation, Social inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Mangli Panchayat of Churah Tehsil located about 100 km from Chamba District headquarter is considered amongst the most backward Panchayats. Mangli Panchayat constitutes 12 villages namely Major, Bhodas, Ruhama, Mangli, Thanood, Thithi, Andwas, Bhukoond, Kindri, Dola, Grwan, Jaalu and Kundlu. The Panchayat is on the border of the state and adjacent to the Doju District of Jammu and Kashmir state. Many people of Doju District migrated to Mangli Panchayat and surrounding areas during the Kargil War fought in 1999 to through back Pakistani troops who invaded the area. The public transportation in the area initiated lately about 10 years back.

The word 'Hali' means a person who earns his/her livelihood by Hal (plough). The traditional occupation of Hali Dalits was to pile off the skins and also work with plough

in the lands of upper caste to earn their livelihood yet they were not even considered agriculture labour.

Social transformation in Hali Dalits of Mangli Panchayat of Chamba District, Himachal Pradesh is supervening. The Dalits were unparalleled to the national development and were deprived in all terms including economic, political and social progress. Like Dalits of other areas in the country, they were looked down upon by Brahmins and Rajputs. However, the state of affairs has changed now and the transformation in the aspects of social and economic could be observed, being discussed under various subheads as presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Area Map of Mangli Panchayat

Map: Area Map of Mangli Panchayat Edited, Originally taken from <https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/himachalpradesh/districts/chamba.htm>

OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY

The traditional occupation of the Dalits was to plough which was the source of livelihood for them. Although the Dalit continues to use plough as a prime occupation yet now they do it in their own lands rather than doing it on Rajputs' land as they were doing earlier. In case they refuse to work they are frightened to be boycotted from the village community, aforesaid forced them to work on the lands of upper caste resulting in low

living standards of the community. But now things have changed. In contrary to the above said the tribal community works in their own land today by shunning their traditional occupation of working on other lands thanks to the Education and advent of basic infrastructure. The Hali youths today are more inclined to be self-reliant; they work in companies, government organisation or start some small business and not giving much importance to agriculture which has resulted in better social status and living standards. This clearly indicates the upward occupational in the community as against the findings of Reddy and Swaminathan (2014) wherein they find that the upward mobility amongst the Dalits is lowest and insignificant.

CULTURAL MOBILITY

Hali Dalits for long time was very backward community in all the aspects as they were exploited by the upper castes, even they were the prey of social evil of untouchability.

In support of the cultural transformation various examples could be cited; one such strong example is of the change in practice of Traditional Rituals at Mahal Nag Temple in (Mangli) Panchayat whereat many local fairs, prayers and religious ceremonies are held. The ceremony involves various instruments namely Kali, Karnai and Ransingha, each made of Brass material. Traditionally, for many decades, only Upper Caste (Rajput and Brahmin) were eligible for performing the rituals using these instruments and it was tabooed for Dalits to perform them as it was considered that the instruments will get impure making Mahal Nag God angry. However, the Dalits were assigned to play instruments such as Drum, Kettledrum and flute, made from leather materials that require more power than the instruments made of brass. The scenario has changed lately, thanks to education and awareness, as Dalits started opposing the above-said practice and questioned 'why they cannot play the instruments made of Brass?', they insisted if they will not be allowed to play them they will stop playing Leather instruments which forced the upper caste to allow them to play all instruments including those made of brass. Although, two practices that the priest of the temple will be a Brahmin and Dalits cannot touch the statuesque in the temple called 'Dhoun' locally still remain unchanged. Change in the practice of instrument playing signifies a strong upward social mobility and time is not far that these social sins will be washed off comprehend local Dalits yet the other two practices state the story of the fact that Dalits are still not treated parallel to upper caste in social lines presently. This could be seen in lines with the 'Sanskritization' proposed by Srinivas (1952).

IMPROVING INTER-CASTE RELATIONS

Although, Hali Dalits were allowed to enter house of Upper castes yet they were not allowed to their kitchen and upper caste cannot even eat food made by Halis. The

source of water in the villages is still the common for all people which are called 'Panihara' in local dialect. Residents of all castes in the village have to go to place where Panihara is located for all their water needs. The lower caste cannot touch the water tap or upper caste while they carry water as it is considered that the water gets impure thus the Dalits have to stand apart at the Panihara while the upper caste takes water. This is one of the practices that maintains gaps between upper caste and lower caste and encourages untouchability. Besides the practice of casteism is maintained through the fact that only upper castes are allowed to cook food in case any Dham(Function) in the village is organised. Also, there is separate space for upper caste and lower caste for eating food in consideration with any function.

The aforementioned practices are diminishing slowly and the inter-caste relations bridging day by day in Mangli Panchayat as the young generation of both Upper castes and Dalits much aware and don't support such malpractices. Now people of both communities may sit together for food during any function in the villages of Mangli Panchayat which could be an endorsing transformation. Although upper castes continue to cook food yet it is being questioned which has enabled an idea of cooking food for both upper and lower castes separately. Now both the communities help, economically and psychologically, each other if any function at one's home. Now Hali Dalits might go homes and kitchen of upper castes and the upper castes may eat foods made by Hali. Earlier Hali people prefer not to go homes of upper caste as they are said to sit where upper castes keep their shoes. These practices are not much prevalent now and people of all communities support each other in all odds of life, thus bridging the caste divide in the area which could be seen as opposite assertions reported generally, for example, by Sooryamoorthy (2008); Waughray (2010) and Jha (2016).

IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS

A survey of 40 Hali Dalits in three villages of Mangli Panchayat namely Major, Bhodas, Ruhama finds that 37 out of 40 people are literate and only 3 are illiterate. Among these 37 Dalits, 12 have studied till intermediate and one till Post-Graduation. The situation, 20 years back, was way different; children were not encouraged to get education. But as soon as the basic infrastructure of Road, Transportation, and Communication developed, many Government schools opened up. Now, every family, rich or poor, tries to give the best possible education to their children in spite of the fact that most of the Hali families are below poverty line. Earlier girls were not empowered to study and they were restricted to housework. But now they are encouraged to study till Intermediate level. Earlier, they used to get married between 15 and 18 years but none was reported getting married before the age of 18 during this. Better education and awareness amongst

the Dalits have bettered their income and social life. The aforesaid is found to be of contrasting views from the assertions made by Mamgain (2014).

IMPROVING LIVING STANDARDS

Better income, education, infrastructure and awareness have brought drastic changes in the lifestyle and living of the Dalits. Out of the 40 surveyed households, 21 houses were found to be concrete and only 19 are made of mud. Fifty years back there was no concrete house in the area and there was a single big room the house constituted wherein the entire house members used to live, also they used to keep their domestic animals including buffalo, cow, ox, sheep and goat in the same room but now all the Hali Dalits home constitute of atleast three to four rooms. Many Dalits have got money for building homes with the help of Government schemes such as Indira Awaas Yojana, PradhanMantri Awas Yojana, etc. Although the efforts by Government are made across the country for stepping up the conditions of the Dalits yet the conditions remain poor (Paswan and Jaideva, 2002; Shergill, 2017).

The social transformation in the area is illustrated and reinforced hereunder through two case studies.

Case Study I: A Case of Caste Atrocities at Major Village of the Panchayat (Mangli)

A girl, named Kamla, who got married to a poor family at the age of 20 years (21 years during interview 2017) in Major village. For financial support to her family, she joined as an Agarwari worker in a nearby village called Thanood. Thanood village, known for the practice of untouchability, is an Upper caste dominant village wherein there is no Dalit household. The residents of Thanood village strongly opposed the appointment of Kamla as they said she cannot feed or teach their children since she is a Dalit. Even the village community barred her to enter their village when she went for the duty she was called name and said that you are Dalit, you go back to your home you cannot come here and teach or feed our children. Kamla told the whole happenings to her family and community. The Whole Dalit Community Backed her and asked her to proceed to the court. She filed the case and won it. After winning, the Thanood village was forced to follow the orders of Court.

This is an example of awareness and education that Kamla went on to fight the case and won it had the case was 20 years back she wouldn't have gone to the court for justice and set an example for others as the Dalits were not aware and afraid to face the upper caste.

Case Study II: Fight against Untouchability in Major Village of Mangli Panchayat

Major Village is a Hali Dalit populous village which comprises of about twenty households. The village is also home to locally famous ancient temple of Mahal Nag as mentioned earlier. There is a group of local Dalits who have been given responsibility of playing instruments such as Drum, Kettledrum and Flute during any ceremony in the area. The group is called 'Bajandari' locally. The group has a head and is presently headed by Dittu Ram aged more than 70 years. During the Interview, Dittu Ram reports several cases of untouchability. When the group goes for performance, they are not allowed to go to kitchen. Although, the function is incomplete until they play instruments yet they are given food in the pots which are used for domestic animals. The young generation recently started opposing this and said they won't come at any function of upper caste to perform if they are treated like this. Hali Dalits further assert that it is highly disrespectful and there is nothing they are gaining out of it. The upper caste got afraid of the fact and is now forced to consider their voice of treating them respectfully and will allow them in kitchen. Dittu Ram states that it was impossible to imagine before 50 years back as any Hali Dalit raising voice would be boycotted from the community.

CONCLUSION

Although Dalits are facing above reported problems everywhere throughout the country, yet it is remarkable to see how Hali Dalits in Chamba are fighting and winning their rights against all the atrocities and social evils. Similar findings are reported by (Ram, 2004). This transformation of Hali Dalits is an upward social transformation of the community found rarely in the country. This transformation of the community could be attributed to education, development of infrastructure, awareness, communication advancements and government efforts.

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