

# Caste Narratives in Grassroots Politics: A Comparative Study of Shimla and Kangra Districts of Himachal Pradesh

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## Abstract

In modern India, despite numerous efforts to reduce caste disparities, the caste system continues to significantly influence political dynamics. This study explores the role of caste in the political landscape of Himachal Pradesh, with a specific focus on the electoral politics of Shimla and Kangra districts. Primary data was collected through structured interviews with residents of these districts. The findings reveal that caste continues to play a pivotal role in village society's political life, even as measures to empower Scheduled Castes through political representation, shared decision-making, and power redistribution have been implemented. Traditional societal norms often dictate outcomes, with older generations, those at the top of the social hierarchy, and patriarchal structures maintaining dominance within the power dynamics of rural areas. The findings highlight the need for voter education that prioritizes developmental concerns over traditional caste- and religion-based considerations. By addressing these issues, it is possible to bridge generational divides and foster a more inclusive and progressive political discourse, ultimately strengthening democratic practices in rural Himachal Pradesh.

**Keywords:** Caste Dynamics, Grass Root Politics, Voting Behaviour, Panchayat Elections.

## Introduction

Caste has been a significant and enduring factor in Indian politics, shaping electoral outcomes, policy decisions, and social dynamics. The deeply entrenched caste system, which stratifies society into hierarchical groups, has historically influenced access to resources, political power, and social mobility. In contemporary India, caste-based identities often determine voting behaviour and political affiliations, as political parties actively mobilize caste groups to secure electoral support (Jaffrelot, 2010). This intersection of caste and politics has led to both empowerment and division within Indian society.

One of the critical implications of caste in politics is the rise of caste-based parties and movements. For instance, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh has been a vocal advocate for Dalits and other marginalized groups. Such movements have succeeded in challenging the dominance of traditionally privileged castes, thereby fostering greater representation for historically marginalized communities (Chandra, 2004). However, the politicization of caste also reinforces caste identities, sometimes leading to polarization and social tensions.

Additionally, caste plays a crucial role in shaping public policies. Reservation policies, which allocate quotas for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in education and employment, are a testament to the state's attempt to address historical injustices. Yet,

these policies have sparked debates over meritocracy and the perpetuation of caste identities (Deshpande, 2011). Critics argue that while reservations promote inclusivity, they also inadvertently reinforce the salience of caste in public discourse.

Despite efforts to transcend caste-based divisions, electoral politics often exploit caste identities. Politicians frequently engage in caste-based vote-bank politics, promising benefits to specific groups to secure their support (Yadav, 1999).

Caste is affecting local governance in India even at the grassroots level. The Panchayati Raj system, introduced to decentralize governance, often mirrors the caste dynamics prevalent in rural areas. Caste hierarchies can influence the selection of candidates, policy implementation, and resource distribution in village panchayats. While reservation policies for women and marginalized castes in local governance aim to democratize power, entrenched caste biases sometimes undermine their effectiveness (Mitra, 2001).

In this context, the present study examines the role of caste in the politics of Himachal Pradesh, particularly in the districts of Shimla and Kangra. The analysis explores how caste influences electoral behaviour and political strategies at the grass-roots level in these regions, providing insights into the broader socio-political dynamics of Indian democracy.

## Literature Review

The intricate relationship between caste and politics in India has been a focal point of academic discourse, reflecting the complex interplay of traditional social hierarchies and modern political dynamics. Kothari (1970), in his edited volume *Caste in Indian Politics*, presents a series of essays analyzing caste movements and their role in political integration. He highlights how democratic politics necessitated upper-caste leaders to engage lower-caste groups to consolidate electoral support, enabling the latter's political participation. Sharma's (1977) work, *Party Politics in a Himalayan State*, delves into the growth of political parties in Himachal Pradesh, emphasizing their role in modernization and political development. He discusses the persistence of upper-caste dominance over Scheduled Castes, describing the latter's subjugation through exploitative systems like the *Bethu*. His study sheds light on the socio-political dynamics of Himachal Pradesh, highlighting the limited political empowerment of marginalized communities in the region. Deshpande (2014), in *The Problem of Caste*, compiles key essays from *Economic and Political Weekly*, addressing the multifaceted nature of caste, including its intersections with politics, class, gender, and law. This comprehensive collection underscores how caste influences public policy, socio-economic structures, and political discourse.

Jodhka (2015), in *Caste in Contemporary India*, examines caste dynamics in rural and urban north-west India. His empirical analysis provides a comparative perspective on caste's persistence in shaping social inequality and discrimination. Kaur (2018), in her paper, *Role of Caste in Indian Politics*, critiques casteism as a significant challenge to Indian democracy. She examines how caste shapes the organization and functioning of political institutions, advocating for reforms such as dismantling caste-based political parties and secularizing education to reduce caste-based inequality and violence. Singh (2019), in his article, *Informal Power Structures and Grassroots Politics in Sirmaur, Himachal Pradesh*, highlights the influence of traditional power structures controlled by the caste elite and the exclusion of marginalized social strata in the village society of Himachal Pradesh.

Rohit (2022), in his article, *Swarna Aayog Movement and the Politics of Caste Polarization in Himachal Pradesh*, analyses that the Swarna Aayog Movement reflects a growing trend of caste-based polarization

in Himachal Pradesh. By intertwining caste identity with political strategies, the movement underscores the evolving nature of electoral politics in the state. The author further explains that such polarization could have long-term implications for social equity and political stability in the region. Singh and Lal (2023) examine the demographic characteristics of Scheduled Castes in Himachal Pradesh, providing statistical insights into their socio-economic conditions. Dwivedi et al. (2024) highlights in book that how Indian philosophical traditions have influenced caste and revolutionary politics, offering a nuanced critique of their interplay. It examines both the justification and resistance of caste hierarchies in shaping social movements. These works collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of caste's multifaceted role in Indian politics, offering insights into its historical roots, contemporary dynamics, and implications for democratic development.

**Research Methodology:**

This empirical study employs both primary and secondary data to examine the role of caste in the political landscape at grass roots of Himachal Pradesh, with a focus on the Kangra and Shimla districts. Primary data was collected using well-structured interview schedules administered to residents of these districts. Subsequently, within these districts, a random sampling method was employed to select respondents across various age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, and caste affiliations to ensure a representative sample. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistical tools, including measures such as frequency and simple percentage. This analytical approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of voting behaviour and political preferences influenced by caste in the two districts.

**Caste Dynamics in Shimla and Kangra Districts: An Analysis**

This study conducts a comparative analysis to examine the influence of caste on the electoral process in Shimla and Kangra districts. To gain insights into voting behaviour, the researcher designed a series of questions targeting respondents' motivations and decision-making during the 2020 Panchayat elections. These questions delved into various factors shaping their participation, with a specific focus on the role of caste in determining electoral choices and outcomes.

**Exploring Voter Sentiments in the Panchayat Election 2020**

Table 1 presents the perspectives of respondents regarding their participation in the 2020 Panchayat elections in Shimla and Kangra districts. The findings are based on a field survey conducted during the study.

**Table 1: Respondents' Insights on Participation in the Panchayat Election 2020**

District	Insights of Voter Opinions	General	Scheduled Castes	Scheduled Tribe	Other Backward Classes	Total
Shimla	Yes	59 (100.0)	36 (97.3)	1 (100.0)	3 (100.0)	99 (99.0)
	No	0	1 (2.7)	0	0	1 (1.0)
	Total	59 (100.0)	37 (100.0)	1 (100.0)	3 (100.0)	100 (100.0)
Kangra	Yes	67	45	13	75	200

		(100.0)	(100.0)	(100.0)	(100.0)	(100.0)
No		0	0	0	0	0
Total		67 (100.0)	45 (100.0)	13 (100.0)	75 (100.0)	200 (100.0)

Source: Field Survey.

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate percentages.

The data in the above table reveals that, 99 percent of respondents confirmed their participation in the Panchayat elections, while 1 percent indicated non-participation in casting their vote. In Kangra district, all respondents (100 percent) reported participating in the election, demonstrating complete electoral engagement across all caste groups surveyed. This high level of participation of respondents suggests strong electoral involvement, reflecting a robust democratic culture in both districts, which underscores a unanimous commitment to democratic processes in the districts.

The near-universal voter turnout in both districts reflects a high degree of political awareness and active civic participation. The minimal non-participation in Shimla and the complete turnout in Kangra point to favorable conditions for voter engagement, including effective mobilization efforts and a collective recognition of the importance of local governance.

This trend also suggests that caste-based disparities have minimal impact on voter turnout, as respondents from various caste groups demonstrated similar enthusiasm for participating in the elections. The findings reflect a deeply rooted democratic ethos in both districts, fostering a shared commitment to grassroots decision-making. Such high participation levels not only signal confidence in the electoral process but also highlight the respondents' acknowledgment of the Panchayat elections as a vital tool for influencing local governance and addressing the specific needs of their communities.

### Determinants of Voting Behaviour in Shimla and Kangra Districts

Factors influencing voting behaviour in Shimla and Kangra districts are shaped by a combination of socio-political, cultural, and logistical elements. Caste-based social identities, while historically influential, appear to have their impact on voting behaviour. Socioeconomic and political factors, such as education and income levels, also influence voter insights, with awareness and access to resources engagement. The political climate, local leadership, and community ties also play vital roles in shaping voters opinion.

### Age-Wise Breakdown of Factors Affecting Voting Behaviour

Age plays a significant role in shaping an individual's ideas and thoughts over time, influencing their voting behaviour. This difference is evident when it comes to their choice of voting platforms and casting votes. The age-wise breakdown of factors affecting voting behaviour in Shimla and Kangra districts is analyzed as follows:

Table 2: Age Wise Breakdown of Factors Affecting Voting Behaviour

Factors Influencing Voting Behaviour	Shimla			Kangra		
	18-45	46 Above	Total	18-45	46 Above	Total
Caste Identity	14	14	28	19 (15.1)	25 (33.8)	44

	(19.7)	(50.0)	(28.3)			( 22.0)
Religious Identity	3 (4.2)	1 (3.6)	4 (4.0)	10 (7.9)	2 (2.7)	12 (6.0)
Charismatic Personality of Leader	34 (47.9)	3 (10.7)	37 (37.4)	47 (37.3)	16 (21.6)	63 (31.5)
Regional Affiliation	4 (5.6)	7 (25.0)	11 (11.1)	20 (15.9)	8 (10.8)	28 (14.0)
Any Other	8 (11.3)	3 (10.7)	11 (11.1)	16 (12.7)	11 (14.9)	27 (13.5)
No Response	8 (11.3)	0	8 (8.1)	14 (11.1)	12 (16.2)	26 (13.0)
<b>Total</b>	71 (100.0)	28 (100)	99 (100)	126 (100)	74 (100)	200 (100)

Source: Field Survey.

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate percentages.

The age-wise breakdown of factors influencing voting behaviour in Shimla and Kangra districts highlights significant differences in electoral priorities across age groups. As shown in Table 2, charismatic personality emerges as the most influential factor for voters in both districts, particularly among younger voters. In Shimla, 47.9 percent of voters aged 18–45 prioritize the personality of the candidate, compared to just 10.7 percent of those aged 46 and above. Similarly, in Kangra, personality matters to 37.3 percent of younger voters and 21.6 percent of older voters. These findings suggest a clear generational shift, with younger voters focusing more on individual traits and capabilities rather than traditional considerations.

Caste remains an influential factor in shaping voting behaviour in both Shimla and Kangra districts, though its impact varies by age and region. In Shimla, caste affects 28.3 percent of respondents, with half (50 percent) of the older age group citing it as an important factor compared to 19.7 percent of younger voters. Similarly, in Kangra, 22 percent of voters overall consider caste important, with older voters (33.8 percent) relying more on it than younger voters (15.1 percent). These patterns reflect a generational divide, with younger voters showing a gradual shift towards merit-based and issue-oriented voting behaviour.

Regional affiliation also plays a notable role in voting preferences, particularly among older voters in Shimla (25.0 percent). In Kangra, however, it resonates more with younger voters (15.9 percent), indicating some regional variation in its influence. Religion, on the other hand, has limited overall impact in both districts. While only 4 percent of Shimla voters consider religion an important factor, its influence is slightly higher among younger voters in Kangra (7.9 percent). Non-responses further highlight variations in voter engagement. In Shimla, younger voters are more likely to provide no response (11.3 percent), suggesting possible uncertainty or disengagement. Conversely, in Kangra, older voters (16.2 percent) are more likely to refrain from answering, pointing to a different dynamic in electoral engagement.

The findings reveal a generational divide in voting preferences. Younger voters in both districts showed a clear inclination towards modern factors such as personality and broader considerations, while older voters were more influenced by traditional factors like caste and regional ties. This divide was more

pronounced in Shimla, where younger voters exhibited progressive electoral preferences. In contrast, Kangra demonstrated a balanced approach, with both modern and traditional influences shaping voting behaviour. Overall, the data underscores a gradual shift in electoral priorities, with personality increasingly becoming a key determinant, particularly among younger voters. Traditional factors, however, persist among older generations, reflecting the enduring impact of caste and regional affiliations in shaping voting patterns.

**People’s Issues and Concerns Raised and Represented by the Candidates in Panchayat Elections**

In Panchayat elections, candidates often raise and represent people's issues and concerns centered on local development and basic needs. Key issues include the lack of proper infrastructure such as roads, electricity, and water supply, along with challenges in sanitation and waste management. Candidates also address concerns about access to education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities, especially for marginalized and economically weaker sections. Social issues like caste discrimination, religious issues, women's empowerment, and support for farmers often feature prominently in their agendas. Additionally, candidates may highlight grievances related to government schemes, unemployment, and the need for better transparency and accountability in governance. These issues reflect the priorities and aspirations of the local community, making them central to the electoral discourse.

**Table 3: Interests represented by the Candidates in Panchayat Elections (Age Wise)**

Issues and Concerns Raised	Shimla			Kangra		
	18-45	46 Above	Total	18-45	46 Above	Total
Individual’s Personal Interests	27 (37.5)	4 (14.3)	31 (31.0)	54 (42.8)	26 (35.1)	80 (40.0)
Village Developmental Issues (roads, electricity, drinking water etc.)	19 (26.4)	3 (10.7)	22 (22.0)	49 (38.9)	12 (16.2)	61 (30.5)
Concerns related to Deity Institutions	9 (12.5)	11 (39.3)	20 (20.0)	3 (2.4)	8 (10.8)	11 (5.5)
Agenda of Political Party	2 (2.8)	1 (3.6)	3 (3.0)	5 (4.0)	5 (6.8)	10 (5.0)
Caste Concerns	10 (13.9)	8 (28.6)	18 (18.0)	11 (8.7)	18 (24.3)	29 (14.5)
Don't Know / Can't say	5 (6.9)	1 (3.5)	6 (6.0)	4 (3.2)	5 (6.7)	9 (4.5)
Total	72 (100.0)	28 (100.0)	100 (100.0)	126 (100)	74 (100)	200 (100)

*Source: Field Survey.*

*Note: Figures in parentheses indicate percentages.*

The age-wise breakdown of issues and concerns raised by respondents in Panchayat elections across Shimla and Kangra districts highlights significant regional and generational variations in priorities. In Shimla, individual's personal interests are the most frequently raised concerns, especially among younger voters, with 37.5 percent of respondents aged 18–45 prioritizing them. In contrast, only 14.3 percent of older voters focus on personal interests, bringing the total for this category to 31 percent. The village developmental issues, such as roads, electricity, and drinking water, are the second-most emphasized category, with 26.4 percent of younger voters raising these concerns compared to 10.7 percent of older voters.

Traditional and cultural values hold greater importance for older voters in Shimla, as evidenced by the significant focus on concerns related to deity institutions. These concerns resonate with 39.3 percent of older voters but only 12.5 percent of younger voters, making up 20 percent of the total. Caste-based concerns also feature prominently among older respondents (28.6 percent), compared to 13.9 percent of younger voters, contributing to 18 percent overall. The agenda of political parties plays a marginal role, with only 3 percent of Shimla respondents identifying it as a concern. Additionally, a notable 6 percent of respondents, primarily younger voters, were either uncertain or unable to articulate specific concerns. In Kangra, individual's personal interests dominate the concerns raised by respondents across age groups. Younger voters (42.8 percent) and older voters (35.1 percent) emphasize personal interests, contributing to a significant total of 40 percent. Developmental issues are the second-most prioritized category, with 38.9 percent of younger voters and 16.2 percent of older voters focusing on this, resulting in a total of 30.5 percent. These figures indicate a strong emphasis on practical and community-level concerns, particularly among younger voters.

Traditional factors, such as concerns related to deity institutions, hold less importance in Kangra compared to Shimla. Only 2.4 percent of younger voters and 10.8 percent of older voters in Kangra raised such concerns, contributing to just 5.5 percent of the total responses. Caste concerns are more prominent in Kangra than deity-related issues, with 24.3 percent of older voters and 8.7 percent of younger voters prioritizing caste, making up 14.5 percent of the total. Similar to Shimla, the agenda of political parties remains a minor concern, with only 5 percent of Kangra respondents raising it. Non-committal responses were slightly lower in Kangra (4.5 percent) than in Shimla, indicating relatively higher engagement.

### **Spotlight on Shimla and Kangra: Comparative Insights**

1. In comparing the two districts, Kangra exhibits a stronger focus on practical issues such as individual and village-level developmental concerns, particularly among younger voters. In contrast, Shimla reflects a blend of traditional and modern concerns, by prioritizing cultural and caste-based issues.
2. A generational gap is evident in both districts, with differences in perspectives between the younger and older generations on various matters. The trends highlight regional diversity in electoral priorities, with Kangra focusing more on pragmatic concerns, while Shimla balances traditional values with emerging modern interests.
3. Traditional power dynamics remain prominent in Shimla district, whereas Kangra district demonstrates greater awareness and trust in constitutional mechanisms. The trends indicate that the people of Shimla district tend to resolve issues with guidance from the village deity or the village Panch (heads), while the people of Kangra primarily address disputes through panchayats, the police, or other government institutions.

### Conclusion and Policy Implications

The comparative study of Shimla and Kangra districts reveals the enduring complexities of caste dynamics in shaping grassroots politics and democratic participation in Himachal Pradesh. Despite commendable strides toward reducing caste-based disparities, the entrenched sociopolitical hierarchies and traditional norms continue to exert a profound influence on electoral behaviour and governance. High voter turnout across caste groups signals a vibrant democratic engagement, yet generational and regional variations underscore the nuanced interplay of caste, age, and socio-cultural priorities.

The younger electorate's emphasis on developmental issues and meritocratic ideals reflects a progressive shift towards issue-based voting, while older generations remain rooted in traditional frameworks of caste identity and cultural values. These divergent priorities point to a critical generational schism that necessitates tailored interventions. Family and local political figures also significantly shape voter preferences, with regional distinctions reflecting the localized impact of caste and political dynamics.

To bridge these divides and foster a more inclusive political environment, targeted voter education campaigns are essential. These initiatives should prioritize developmental concerns for younger voters while respecting the cultural sensibilities valued by older generations. Strengthening anti-discrimination policies and implementing robust community engagement programmes can dismantle caste-based hierarchies, promote social cohesion, and cultivate an ethos of equality and justice.

The findings also invite a philosophical reflection on the tension between tradition and modernity, where the centripetal forces of historical stratification confront the centrifugal aspirations of egalitarian democracy. By addressing the limitations of existing measures, redistributing power in rural governance, and transcending the parochial confines of caste and religious considerations, Himachal Pradesh can catalyze a transformative democratic renewal.

Ultimately, the goal of grassroots politics must align with the principles of equity, harmony, and a progressive social order. This transformation is not just a political necessity but a moral obligation to ensure that democratic processes rise above entrenched identities. It seeks to empower all citizens to actively contribute to the collective aspirations of an inclusive and sustainable society.

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