

Narrating Caste: Social Hierarchy in Haryanvi Folktales

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Abstract

Caste has long shaped the social life of Haryana, influencing relationships, occupations, status and access to economic and social resources. Its presence is also clearly visible in Haryanvi folktales, where caste appears not only as a social institution but as part of the everyday ways in which people understand identity, difference and social position. These narratives often draw upon familiar caste roles, occupations and stereotypes, reflecting the social world from which they emerge.

At the same time, folktales do more than simply preserve existing hierarchies. Through humour, irony, reversal and unexpected shifts in power, they can also question social assumptions and expose the tensions within caste-based relationships. A socially powerful figure may be ridiculed, while a supposedly weaker character may succeed through wit, intelligence or practical knowledge.

This paper examines selected Haryanvi folktales to understand how caste is represented, negotiated and sometimes challenged within the folk imagination. It argues that these narratives provide an important cultural archive through which changing attitudes towards caste, social status and inequality can be understood in relation to the wider transformations taking place in contemporary Haryanvi society.

Keywords: Haryanvi folktales, caste, social hierarchy, folk narrative, social relations, cultural representation

INTRODUCTION

Caste has been seen as an extreme form of social stratification. Caste can be seen as an epitome of traditional societies of folk narratives, a “closed system” where generations after generations individuals aid similar kinds of work and lived more or less similar kinds of lives.

Caste is ‘a hereditary, endogamous, usually localized group, having a traditional association with an occupation, and a particular position in the hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed,

among other things, by the concepts of pollution and purity, and generally, maximum commensality occurs within the caste' ¹.

The following features become evident from this definition. First, membership in a caste is by birth. Second, a caste is an endogamous unit. Third, members of each caste traditionally had an occupation or trade to pursue. Fourth, castes are graded in a local hierarchy. Fifth, notions of pollution and purity govern the nature and extent of the relationships between castes.

Interestingly the term caste is not of Indian origin. Its origin has been located in the Portuguese word 'casta' meaning 'race' or pure 'stock'. Also it were the outsiders who came from the west who first used the term caste to make sense of the social organization of the Indian Society. It is currently used to refer to two different systems of social relations, viz varna and jati

VARNA SYSTEM

The varna system is a broad framework that applies, more or less, to the entire society. In the tales, four kinds of varnas have been mentioned viz. Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra in decreasing order of their importance in social hierarchy. There is a fifth category of "Untouchables" who are considered outside the Varna system and are considered at the bottom of social hierarchy.

In the Rig-Veda the word 'varna' is never applied to any one of these classes - Brahman, Kshatriya, et al. It is only the 'Arya' varna or the Aryan people that is contrasted with the 'Dasa' varna. The Satapatha Brahmana on the other hand describes the four classes as the four varanas. Varna means colour and it was in this sense that the word seems to have been employed in contrasting the Arya and the Dasa referring to their fair and dark colours respectively. The colour connotation of the word was so strong that later on when the classes came to be regularly described as varnas, four different colours were supposed to be distinguished ²

A Brahmin devotes himself completely to the study of Vedas, performance of yajnas, his nature characterised by peace, humility, tranquility, simplicity, knowledge. In folk narratives like *The Lion and the Brahmin*, ³ the poverty of this varna is depicted. The lion accepts the Brahmin as his guru and gives him enormous amount of wealth.

The Brahmin's duty of studying Vedas is represented in *The Brahmin and Jat story* ⁴. In this story, a farmer of vaish varna gives an amusing retort to a Brahmin. Brahmin challenges him if he could have a reply something like this taking a dig at his illiteracy:

Damchar damchar dhua duoo

Phatkar phatkar kuan phoo

¹ M . N. Srinivas Varna and Caste in Caste in Modern India and Other Essays. Asia Publishing House, Bombay. 1962.

² (Ghurye 1950: 47).²

³ Recorded in cassette

⁴ ibid

Khadbadh khadbadh khua khoo

Farmer replies:

Damchar damchar dhua duoo

Phatkar phatkar kuan phoo

Khadbadh khadbadh khua khoo

Saer sarapar sarpar soo

To this, the Brahmin had no answer.

In the story, *A Lucky Girl*,⁵ he is engaged in the task of accomplishing marriage of Raja's daughter. In the story, *The Fast On Monday*,⁶ he has been depicted accepting gifts and offerings. .

The second varna in hierarchy is kshatriya, whose main duty is to protect devas..In various folk narratives such as *Raja Surajnarayan*, *Raja Bhoj*, *Raja Vikramaditya*, *Druv Bhagat* ⁷the Raja performs the duty of protecting his subjects.

The third varna in hierarchical order is Vaishya who are agriculturist and do animal husbandry. They also do trade and commerce. In folktales, mostly Jats perform this role. for instance in the tale of *Jat and Constable*⁸ the jat does the farming chores and domesticates animals. In *Raja and Jat*⁹, he sows bajra, in *Jat and Wolf*,¹⁰ he sows corn.

Trade and commerce is generally carried by Baniya in folk narratives as he is believed to be endowed with a sharp intellect. In the story the *Thief and Baniya*,¹¹ the baniya tricks the thief who had come to trick them. The thief himself gets caught and hurt in the process.

In Haryanvi folk narratives, one comes across narratives where main characters are from either from same caste or different castes. The casteist features exhibited by these narratives are features of Hindu society, in general.

G.S. Ghurye, a famous sociologist¹², identified six different features of the Hindu caste system which are reflected in Haryanvi folk narratives as well.

In folk narratives, there is segmental division of society. Caste are groups with well developed life styles of their own. The membership of the groups is determined by birth and not by choice. The status of a person

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

⁸ ibid

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ Recorded in cassette

¹² ibid

depends not on the amount of wealth he possesses but on the rank that the persons caste enjoy in the Hindu society

Another feature in Haryanvi folk narrative is hierarchy where there is a definite scheme of social precedence amongst castes. Each group is given a specific status in the overall framework of hierarchy. Brahmins have been considered at the highest pedestal in the society. Chandgyo Upanishad¹³ in third chapter states that the purity of the intake of food by Gods through mouth is comparable to the purity which a Brahmins represent. In Bhagvat Gita¹⁴ also the Brahmins enjoy the highest rank. This status of sheer respect and storehouse of wisdom of Brahmins is no more. Their importance remains only to the extent they are required for carrying out religious ceremonies and rituals.

There is restriction of feeling and social intercourse. There are minute rules as to what sort of food or drink could be accepted by a person and from what particular caste. In the folktales there are various instances where various characters follow instructions in matters relating to their interaction with low castes. In present context, there have been less rigidity in rules regarding caste demarcations and phenomena of mobility among caste is quite conspicuous.

There are various civil and religious disabilities to one caste and privileges to different sections. Segregation of individual castes or groups of castes in the village is the most obvious mark of civil privileges and disabilities. Certain sacraments could not be performed by any caste other than the Brahmins. In *khand ka Batau*¹⁵, a Brahmin advises a person on a religious matter and solves his dilemma. In the story, the person have his meals after offering the food to the guest first. But finding a guest every day became a problem for him. So, the brahmin advises him to form figures symbolic of guest, made of finely powdered sugar and keep them in the almirah. Whenever any guest do not turn up, invoke these figures before having your food.

Shudras, and other lower castes were not allowed to read or learn the sacred scriptures. In folktales such as *Chamar and khichri*, *Chamar and Jat*, *The Story of Son of Chamar*, *The Moustached Fear*, *The Story of the Seed of Brinjal*¹⁶, simple, naive, forgetful, fearing nature of chamar is represented.

In the story, *The Moustached Fear*-when police came to the house of Chamar to look for him to appear for trial then this chamar, out of fear, worn the apparels of his wife and came out and said to police, "Sir, my husband is not in the house. He has gone out somewhere." The police was quite amazed and shocked after seeing moustaches on the face of the chamari. When questioned by the police as to how she has grown these moustaches on her face, Chamar, in the guise of Chamari answered, "these moustaches have grown out of fear of police."

Generally in folktales, there is restricted choice of occupation. Each caste considers a particular occupation as its legitimate calling. To abandon the hereditary occupation in preference of another, even it is more lucrative, is not considered right. But I had been pleasantly surprised to come across a folktale of a son of a chamar¹⁷ who impresses a baniya and the latter decides to teach him the tricks of his trade and also marries off his daughter to him.

¹³ Chandgyo Upanishad

¹⁴ Bhagvat Gita

¹⁵ Recorded in cassette.

¹⁶ ibid

¹⁷ Recorded in cassette.

There is a severe restriction on marriage alliances. Caste group observe strict endogamy. Members of a caste group marry only within their caste. However, there are a few exception. In some regions of the state, the upper caste man could marry a lower caste woman. This kind of marriage alliance is known as hypergamy. There are Anuloma marriages, where a man from upper caste has the right to marry a woman from lower caste. The other form is Pratiloma marriage, when a lower caste man is allowed to marry a woman from upper caste. I came across another interesting folk narrative titled *Raja Vikramaditya*.¹⁸ His father Dharamsen gets him married to girls from all four varnas-Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra and all four gave birth to six children.

GOTRA- HONOUR KILLINGS

Gotra is a term applied to a clan, a group of families, or a lineage-exogamous and patrilineal-whose members trace their descent from a common male ancestor, usually a sage of ancient times. Believed to have begun to consolidate around 10-8 century B.C., the present day gotra classification is supposed to have been created from a core of eight rishis. Scholar and activist Jagmati Sangwan points that not all honor killings even within Haryana involve same-gotra couples. According to her, the majority of the marriages condemned by Khap panchayat are of couples who do not share a same gotra.¹⁹

In the system of marriage gotra is of utmost importance. It needs to be considered very seriously. It is the synonym of English word 'clan'. Gotra means caste, heredity, group etc. Gotra is a bigger group than vansh. It is always not possible to trace the pedigree, through one's name but through common ancestors, relations can be detected. In simple words, gotra can be considered as a group of vanshs.

It is decided either through the maternal's side or the paternal's side. If the persons belong to the same gotra they consider themselves kith and kins due to common ancestry.

These people belonging to same gotra cannot get married in the same gotra because due to the concept of 'sanskaras' they consider themselves as brothers and sisters. So, the gotra of mother, grandmother and father should not match in each of the two families, if the marriage has to be consummated.

Honour killings is a misleading term ritualized form of murder precipitated by the aggressor's perceived loss of honour. The perpetrators are generally male and the victims most often female.

There are areas that permit intra-village and intra-gotra marriages and do not have caste or Khap Panchayat. So the self-styled Mahapanchayat cannot claim to represent all communities in Haryana.²⁰

SCHEDULED CASTE

¹⁸ *Raja Vikramaditya*

¹⁹ Jagmati Sangwan

²⁰ Ammu Joseph, Sunday magazine, Hindu

The untouchable castes are confined to the lower rungs of ritual hierarchy and perform degrading occupations like disposing of the dead animals, processing of skins, leather works, scavenging and work at the cremation grounds. These castes act as menial workers, labourers, servants, watchmen and wardmen in folk narrative. Their housing settlements are excluded from the centre of the village. Generally, they are also lowest in income, health, education and culture resources. The low caste groups varies from place to place in terms of being labeled untouchable. A caste such as dhobi (washerman) or teli (oil presser) in 'Qazi and teli'²¹ may be considered untouchable in one part of Haryana but not in the other. In Haryanvi folk narratives, I came across various folk narratives for instance *Chamar and khichri*, *Chamar and Jat*, *The Son of Chamar* et al, where the scheduled caste - chamar has been mentioned:

i) The description of scheduled castes as a marginalized group in folk narratives focusses on a series of disabilities that are imposed on them. They face a denial or restriction of access to public facilities, such as wells, schools, roads, post offices and courts, to temples where their presence might pollute the dirty as well as the higher-caste worshippers, and from rest-houses, tanks and shrines connected to temples. Untouchables and Shudras are shown ineligible to become sanyasis (holy men) and forbidden to learn the Vedas (the earliest and most sacred books of orthodox Hinduism) in folk narratives, on style of life, from engaging into some profitable employment, requirements of reverence in forms of address, language, sitting and standing in presence of higher castes, liabilities of unremunerated labour for the higher castes and to the performance of menial services for them et al..

DALITS

Dalits are at the bottom in the social hierarchy. In Haryanvi folk narratives, they are referred to as 'churas'. I could not come across any folk narrative where they are made the topic of the tales by villagers. The restrictions are more extreme in their case as compared to other scheduled castes. In addition, every kind of social and economic alternatives are denied to these Dalit groups so that they are structurally held together to provide the substratum. The proof of this argument lies in the fact that whenever there is some kind of questioning and signs of revolt among the Dalits, all the other caste groups combine and would not mind using overt violence to put them back in their old place.²²

Even though violence against Dalits has become legally illegitimate, the cultural acceptance of violence against the group keeps it in vulnerable position. The recent spurt of atrocities committed against Dalits is not an accidental and sporadic phenomena but a desperate attempt to sustain the in-built cultural and economic advantages built on the ethic of violence.

The subtle relationship between the structure and the individual episodes was clearly recognized and pointed out by Alien Feldman in the following manner.

"The traditional polarization of the analysis of violence into structure versus event can be seen as two complementary blockages that inhibit the human sciences from speaking to situations where the practices and genealogies of violence self organize into continuums of iterative meaning, where the very form of violence

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²² Feldman, Allen, 1999, *The Event and Its Shadow: Figure and Ground in Violence* in Transforming Anthropology, Journal of the Association of Black Anthropologists, Vol.8, Nos.1 and 2, American Anthropological Association

can capture the movement and patterns of history in itself, and where practices of violence both reflect and fashion social agency”²³

Caste and Women

In an revealing article by Vrinda Sharma²⁴, she states that Dalit women in Ambala lead unhygienic lives for wages of Rs 15 a month.”*I was not used to doing this work before I was married but my mother-in-law forced me. I donot blame her;it was the only way we could feed our families. We were told that our ancestors did this and this was the only work we could do as dalits*” says Kusum, who left scavenging ten months ago to work as a sweeper.

Caste hierarchy and untouchability prevented women from rising to any other job.”*We don’t chose to do this.We are born into it because we are at the absolute bottom of society.The job came as a legacy.but I made sure that my children never touched these baskets,*” says Manju whose eldest son is in college.

To keep us from coming into the house,we were made to use a rickety wooden staircase against an exterior wall.When I was eight onths pregnant,I slipped.Instead of having pity,they abused me for polluting the house.”recalls Saroj

In post-independence period, the Constitution has abolished untouchability and its practice has been forbidden. The Constitution has also guaranteed various social,political,economic,educational rights to the dalits. The dalits are identified as lowest castes in traditional caste hierarchy who were formerly called as untouchables , socially exploited by the Hindus.In present scenario in Haryana the condition of SC appears to improve a little but still far from being promising as the statistical datas shows:

Table 4 and table 5 state the total population of SC, as percentage to total population in 2001 is 19.35% which is not less and can prove to be a good manpower if utilized well. Table 6 shows the percentage of literate SC which is 55.45%. as percentage to total SC , so almost half of the SC population is still illiterate. Enrolement ratio of students belonging to SC in recognized schools is also not very encouraging as can be inferred from the datas in table 7 and table 8. Table 9 shows that agriculture still is not a preffered option for SCs. But they are beneficiaries of government loans and grants for industrial purposes, other agricultural purposes, for trade and business, self employment, for purchase of vehicles . Table 10 shows that number of government employees belonging to SCs and OBCs are very less and most of the reserved seats for them remain vacant due to non-availability of required qualified candidates. Table 11 shows a detailed data on SC working population classified into broad industrial categories, 2001. The largest share is of non-workers category.

OTHER BACKWARD CLASSES

Other Backward Classes refers to a constitutional category and comprise socially disadvantaged Shudra Castes. Castes located in the middle of the traditional stratification system are the constituents of this section of the population. It is thus a social layer intermediate between the twice born and the untouchable.if put in other words , it is a stratum of non-untouchable Hindu. Castes located low in the traditional stratification

²³ Alien Feldman1999

²⁴ Vrinda Sharm, an endless fight against manual scavenging, 24.05.10

system. Comprising a heterogeneous category, these include some of the dominant castes of agriculturists as well as many socially & economically deprived groups who are at least as deprived as SC & ST's. These sections are educationally and occupationally inferior to the traditionally privileged castes. Untouchability & isolation were never their problem, their inferiority to the upper castes however used to be traditionally legitimised. Status disabilities afflicting them used to be inherited restricting their progress and prosperity. In a limited number of cases a few non-Hindu communities are also included under this category. In the folk narratives, these include topstratum-owner cultivators, landless tenant cultivators, artisans & service castes who remain under the economic and political control of the landowning caste. In past such marginalized sections among the other backward classes worked as forced labourer, domestic servant & palanquin bearers for whom they were dependent for their survival. Landlords used to receive customary payment from them on festive occasions. Liberalization, and not the backward class movement, represents the march towards a 'bourgeois revolution' which presents the only possibility of 'annihilating caste' as Ambedkar²⁵ envisaged. The backward class movement, since it strengthens caste identities and keeps economic growth in the thrall of caste, ought to be regarded as a manifestation of 'bourgeoisification',²⁶ Indian style. Hence, despite its ideological underpinnings, the backward class movement does not represent a 'revolution'

The Jatis

The Jatis, connect social groupings of people, differ considerably from region to region to region. Each linguistic region has a large no of jatis. Jatis are relatively small endogamous groups with a distinctive style of life and a specific traditional occupation. Each Jati has a name and tends to locate its status by referring to the varna scheme of hierarchy. The different jatis in a region are arranged in a vertical order. However, unlike the varna scheme, the mutual position of jatis has been less clear and subject to contestations. Many jatis have claimed higher status than assigned to them by others. This ambiguity has been observed particularly in the middle level caste groupings. I came across many jatis mentioned in various folk narratives: In *Dhruv Bhagat story* –Kahar Jati is mentioned (Water carriers). In *Raja Uttanpad*²⁷ story, his second wife Suruchi, asks a Kahar, "Brother, kahar, you stop the water carrier service and call Raja." as she wants that Raja should fulfill his third promise now. Apart from Kahars, other jatis like Carpenter, potter, Barber, Teli others all who serve other Jatis owing to their nature of profession have also been mentioned. In *Bhaiya Dooj Story*²⁸ a brother while going to his sister-in-law's place to invite her for his marriage, meets carpenter's son on his way who is cutting the wood. The carpenter's son says, "The brahmin's son has died, so I'm gathering woods for his son's funeral." Further, he meets a potter making the pots. Other folktales like the *Karva Chauth*, *The Story of Ganesha*, *Tapka*, *Raja Teli*²⁹ mention various jatis. The Ahir Jati has been the butt of laughter in various folktales.

MINORITIES

In a very general sense, when a group of people is divided on any issue or approach or characteristics, the difference usually produces a bigger sub-group and a smaller sub-group. The smaller sub-group is called minority whereas the bigger sub-group is called the majority. It is also possible that the two groups could be

²⁵ B.R. Ambedkar

²⁶ ibid

²⁷ Recorded in cassette

²⁸ ibid

²⁹

of equal strength or the smaller group may have control over power and other resources. So it is not always the numerical strength or non-strength which is the deciding factor for a group to be called a minority. In Haryanvi folk narrative, the Jats have been dominating the tales related to caste although they belong to vaishya varna and are numerically less conspicuous in the Haryanvi society for instance *The Jat and Brahmin*, *Chamar and Jat*, *Jat and Constable*, *Raja and Jat*, *Jat and Wolf*³⁰ et al.

In contemporary scenario, this issue is becoming more pronounced and pointed with each passing day. But it is now widely felt that population size is not the only feature of minority status. If a group is discriminated against on the basis of religion, race or culture it can be considered a minority group. The sub-commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities set up under the Human Rights Commission which drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has defined minorities as only those non-dominant groups in a population which possesses or wish to preserve stable, ethnic, religious or linguistic traditions or characteristics markedly different from those of the rest of the population.

In the international Encyclopedia of the Social Science, Arnold Rose has defined minority without any quantitative connotations. He defines it "as a group of people differentiated from others in the same society by race, nationality, religion or language, who both think of themselves as differentiated group and are thought of by others as a differentiated group with negative connotations. Further, they are relatively lacking in power and hence are subjected to certain exclusions, discrimination and other differential treatments."³¹

Jagnath Pathy (1988) has also listed out the defining properties of minority group. In his opinion, the minorities are subordinate in some way to the majority, *Distinguishable from the majority on the basis of physical or cultural features. Collectively being regarded and treated as different and inferior on the basis of these features, and Excluded from the full participation in the life of the society.*³²

He further says, *discrimination, prejudice and exclusion by the dominant group and self segregation by the subordinate of minority constitute the basis form minority identification*³³

The religious groups may be divided into linguistic groups and vice-versa. This phenomenon is known as *cross-cutting cleavage*. Accordingly, a person may be a member of religious minority and yet of a linguistic majority or vice-versa. How such a person would behave depends upon his or her interest from issue to issue.

The wish to preserve distinctive features of one's social and cultural life is an essential feature of these minority communities. Continuance of domination, seclusion, migration have made it difficult to make political boundaries which coincide racial, linguistic, ethnic or religious divisions. As a consequence there are always groups which are different from other group in terms of language, religion etc. the dominant group tries to assimilate the minority groups. The non-conformist very often are likely to be persecuted. This attitude of the majority group generates a greater consciousness among the members of the minority community for preserving their separate identity. The wish to have separate identity often gives rise to political demands. The demands are for either special treatment, recognition of the used for preserving minority identity or in extreme

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³¹ Arnold Rose

³² Jagnath Pathy (1988)

³³ Jagnath Pathy (1988)

cases for autonomy or secession from the area. for instance,in Haryana, these demands led to the formation of the district of Mewat.

With these general properties a group can be identified as being a minority group, there are, however, operational problems of applying such specifications with minority because a great deal depends on the situation existing in a particular society at a particular time. Social groups can only be properly identified in terms of their relationship to other groups. The nature of such relationship is determined largely by the system of control over economic and political resources prevailing in that society and the historical development of those relationships. The numerical strength is, thus not an objective criterion to distinguish on group from the other. The concept of minority is, therefore, dynamic depending on the relation of domination and discrimination.

A minority group very often organizes into a coherent group drawing on the shared values culture, language or religion. For example, the Muslims, Buddhists , Jains are a minority group on the basis of their religion in comparison to the majority of Hindus in Haryana. If one refers to the statistical data of population by religion in Haryana-2001, one can see Hindus forming majority with 88.23% followed by Muslims 5.78%,Sikhs5.54%, Jains 0.27% Christians0.13% ,Buddhists 0.03 and other religions not stated in the data in Table- 12 .Besides having an identity on the basis of religion, a group may also identify itself on the ethnic basis. Thus, a Muslim may identify not only on the religious basis but also on the ethnic basis. He or she could consider himself or herself a Haryanvi or resident of any other state. A great deal depends on the politics of the situation. Thus, many minority groups are also ethnic groups for they group around shared values and culture.

The Constitution of India uses the term minority but nowhere defines it. The Supreme Court and various High Courts have so far depended on the statistical criterion. Any community that does not constitute more than 50% in the state is thus called a minority. Furthermore, the Indian Constitution recognizes two types of minorities based on language and/or religion. The Constitution does not recognize minorities based on culture, race or nationality.

In Haryana, while the minority groups are allowed to preserve their distinct characteristics they are also subjected to a great deal of discrimination. The discrimination may be in the form of fewer Government funds for minority educational institutions etc. very often they are discriminated in their social life. They are subjected to ridicule and segregation which further compels them to stay away from the majority. That is why one find that minority groups stay together in ghettos away from the majority.

This notion in fact leads to assimilation among some ambitious members of the minority community. These people in order to advance themselves seek to rid themselves of their disabilities by deliberately surrendering their typical features. These disabilities may, many times, be sufficient to induce assimilation, also certain encouragement is given to induce this change. In case assimilation is found to be impossible, some resort to the very direct method of annihilation. The members of minority groups are eliminated by expulsion or by massacre.

But Haryana has always adopted the policy of tolerance and fair treatment dealing with minority community. A great deal of leeway is given for the preservation and pursuance of the minority social and cultural life. Though the state may have in mind the assimilation of various minority groups as the final goal it will nevertheless adopt a tolerant attitude towards minority groups as long as the minority communities do not cause any destabilising effects on the state. In any case a great deal seems to depend on the bargaining power a particular disadvantaged group has. Some are at disadvantage in their effort to bring to state's notice that certain of their socio-cultural rights need protection.Many groups in Haryana claiming to be minorities hold

protest demonstrations to get more state favors. In such situations, the task of the state becomes quite challenging.

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