



POLITICS OF REGIONALISM IN HIMACHAL PRADESH: AN OUTCOME OF SPATIO-POLITICAL ORGANISATION AND VOTING CLEAVAGES

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents historical background to spatio-political organisation of Himachal Pradesh with a focus on voting cleavages. The upper and lower regions of Himachal Pradesh are historically different because the nature and types of movements in these areas were different. Historical differences in these two regions have given birth to a very strong territorial cleavage, which divides Himachal Pradesh into two distinct almost equal parts with different socio-economic set ups and political centers. The politics of the State have been influenced by territorial cleavage to a considerable extent. Both the Congress and the BJP are exploiting this cleavage. The Congress Party is dominating in horticultural or upper or old areas and the BJP has an edge in agricultural or lower or new areas of the State.

KEYWORDS: Territorial Cleavage, Praja Mandal, Bhai Do Na Pai, Horticulture Region, Agricultural Region.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present day Himachal Pradesh consists of two types of hill areas. Before independence, the first types of areas were ruled by native Princes. In these areas the people's struggle was influenced by the nationalist movement in British India, but its object was never to overthrow or totally eliminate their Princely States. Most of these areas were of *Old Himachal* and popularly known as *Simla Hills*. The other hill areas, which joined Himachal Pradesh in 1966, were under direct British administrative control before independence. The people in these areas participated in the struggle for freedom with the specific objective of overthrowing alien British rule. These areas were popularly known as *Punjab Hills*. Thus, in this hilly region prior to independence, two types of movements were going on simultaneously, i.e. the Praja Mandal movement, and the Freedom movement (Sharma, 1975a, p.109).

2. PRAJA MANDAL MOVEMENT IN SIMLA HILLS

In 1939 the idea of forming Praja Mandals was conceived in the session of *All India State Peoples' Conference* at Ludhiana and consequently Praja Mandals originated in several Hill-States of Himachal Pradesh. The main object of the Praja Mandal movement was the democratisation of the administration of the Himachal Hill-Rulers.

The *Himalayan Riasti Praja Mandals* came into existence to co-ordinate the work of the Praja Mandals in December 1939, and was made responsible for directing the activities of the political and social workers in numerous Hill-States. Simultaneously, Praja Mandals were organised in Chamba, Sirmaur, Mandi, Bushahr, Sundernagar and other small Princely States (Ibid, p.111).

In the beginning, the *All India States Peoples' Conference* faced many problems in its attempt to establish its units in Hill-States as Princes adopted a hostile attitude to the growth of any effective and organised public opinion in their respective States. As a result, the popular movement in Himachal remained comparatively weak. Entry of Praja Mandal workers were banned by the Rannas of small states like Ghund,

Theog, Balson, Bhagal, Bhajji, Beja, Darkoti, and Keonthal on the pretext that this was the policy of their States that no outsiders be allowed to represent the case of their subjects and the local workers of the Praja Mandals were arrested. The British authorities too became suspicious and watchful and warned State governments against the activities of Praja Mandal and its sister organisations (Balokhra, 1995, p.326).

This followed the famous *Bhai Do Na Pai* movement, which meant not to give anything, and to co-operate with the rajas. To help British in the Second World War, the Raja of Sirmaur started extracting large sums of money, wanted recruits and foodstuff as his contribution from the people (Chauhan, 1998, pp.175-177). When the exaction reached a limit, the people of Panjhotia formed a '*Kishan Sabha*' and requested the ruler to personally listen to their tales of woe against the high-handedness of the officials. On the refusal of the Ruler to accede to their request, they formed an independent government and their stirring slogan was *Bhai Do Na Pai*. It was an extension of civil disobedience movement, which led to the imprisonment of a large number of Praja Mandal workers. Thus, the Panjhotia agitation in Sirmaur became a landmark in the people's struggle for emancipation (Mitto, 1993, p.42). This movement was regarded as an extension of the *Quit India Movement* of 1942 (Sharma, 1975a, p.112). As a result of such attempts a general awakening and political consciousness grew among the masses (Chauhan, 1998, pp.175-176).

The strong emergence of Praja Mandals in Himachal Pradesh had led to the abolition of the menace of Slavery, Beggar and Begaries by the Rulers, which further became one of the important causes for the organisation of Praja Mandals in Himachal Pradesh. (Ibid, p.176).

3. PRAJA MANDAL MOVEMENT IN PUNJAB HILLS

The main objective of the various Praja Mandals functioning in Punjab Hill-States was to overthrow the British rule. The hill areas of Kangra, Kullu and Lahaul-Spiti met with a different fate after their capture by the British as a result of Anglo-Sikh war of 1846. The Britishers decided to pension off rajas and to take these areas under direct British administrative control. All these areas were grouped together and organised into one district of Kangra with headquarter at Dharamshala. The control of British administration gradually tightened and by an appeal to the martial traditions of hill people, they were able to turn these hills into fertile recruitment area for their Dogra Regiments. The British rulers were, therefore, very sensitive to any growth of the feelings of nationalism in these areas and were extra vigilant to curb and suppress any beginnings of national movement. All these measures and precautions however could not prevent the spread of nationalistic feelings especially after Mahatma Gandhi's efforts to transform Indian National Congress (Balokhra, 1995, pp.332-333).

In Kangra region with the help of Mahatma Gandhi very successful Satyagraha was launched in which many Congress leaders participated. Besides, the *Quit India Movement* also had received good response from Kangra people (Chauhan, 1998, p.178). In spite of all repressive measures, the foundation of national movement had been deeply and firmly laid in the Kangra district.

By 1945 a network of Praja Mandals had been set up in the Hill-States of Himachal Pradesh. The political developments taking place in the British India spurred the hill people to organise themselves into a single political organisation to better protect their rights and co-ordinate their activities for the democratisation of the Princely order (Sharma, 1996, p.49).

As the Praja Mandal movement gathered momentum, its constituents in various Hill-States were merged in 1946, into the *Himalayan Hill States Regional Council*, which under the leadership of Dr. Y.S. Parmar, Pandit Padam Dev, Mr. Shiva Nand Ramaul and others played an important role in the integration of Hill-States and the formation of Himachal Pradesh (Mittoo, 1993, pp.42-43).

4. SPATIO-POLITICAL ORGANISATION OF HIMACHAL PRADESH

After independence, the present shape of Himachal Pradesh as one of the spatio-structural, compact and contiguous region has been acquired through by three different stages. The first stage for making of Himachal Pradesh has come when the Praja Mandal launched on 18th February 1948, the *Suket Satyagraha* for the merger of Princely States, which received an overwhelming support of the people. This revolution has

shooked the Himalayan States, and within a week three-fourths of the States were liberated without firing a shot. Ruler after ruler signed the merger agreement and on 15th April 1948, came into existence the Chief Commissioner's Province of Himachal Pradesh (See Map-1a). This province consisted of "30 big and small Hill-States (Mittoo, 1993, p.49). These were Chamba, Mandi, Suket, Bushahr and its tributaries Kaneti and Delath; Keonthal and its tributaries Koti, Theog, Madhan, Ghund and Ratesh; Baghal, Baghat, Jubbal with its tributaries Rawin and Dhadi; Kumairsain, Bhajji, Mahlog, Balsan, Dhami, Kuthar, Kunihar, Mangal, Beja, Darkoti, Tharoch, Sangri and Sirmaur" (Singh, 1994, p.157).

Politically, however, the formation of Himachal Pradesh may be regarded as pure adhocism and no definite policy was followed by the Indian government in the integration of these States. Spatially the Himachal Pradesh of 1948 was neither of proper shape nor size (See Map-1a). The geographical boundaries were disrupted by Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU), and the Chamba district was separated from the rest of the Himachal Pradesh by the Kangra district of Punjab. Again, "though Shimla was the capital of Himachal Pradesh, it was in Punjab... the political and geographical set up of Himachal was thus very vague" (Ahluwalia, 1998, p.34). Nevertheless, the merger of these Princely Hill-States was of great historical and administrative significance. The Hill State of Bilaspur was made into a separate Chief Commissioner's Province on 15th August 1948 on account of a scene of Govind Sagar associated with the Bhakra Nangal project (Kant, 2000, p.15). Moreover, its ruler raja Anand Chand was against the merger of his State with Himachal Pradesh.

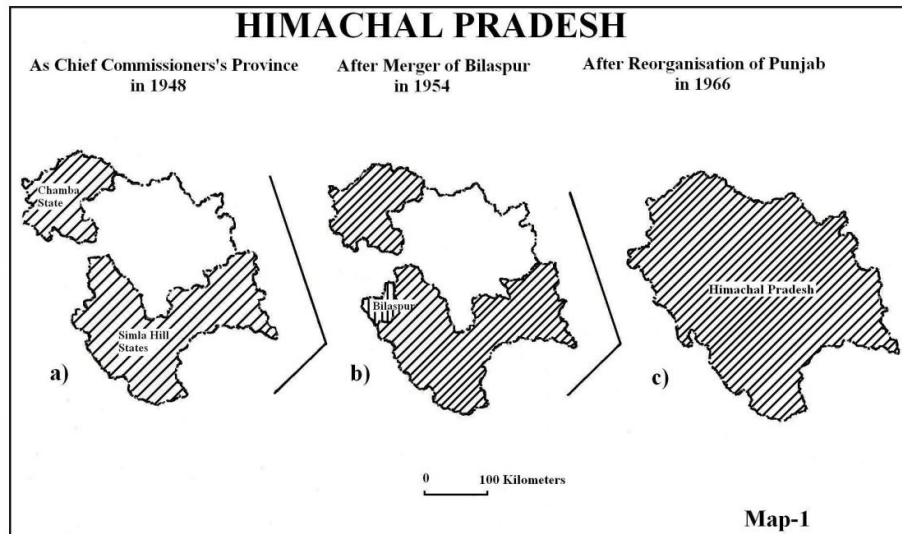
In the absence of political parties in 1948, Praja Mandals were the only forum through which the hopes and aspirations of people got reflected (Sharma, 1996, p.175). To give a concrete shape to the promises made during struggle by the leadership, the Praja Mandals were merged to form the Himachal Pradesh Congress Committee, but the leadership soon realised that there was the need to have a proper shape for Himachal Pradesh without losing its identity and *Pahari* culture and Ethos (Ahluwalia, 1993, pp.240-241).

With the inauguration of the constitution on 26th January 1950, Himachal Pradesh became a Part 'C' State (Khosla, 1975a, p.120). The second stage came on 1st July 1954, when Bilaspur was finally merged in Himachal Pradesh, which was also a Part 'C' State (See Map-1b). After two years of the merger of Bilaspur State, the State Reorganisation Act 1956, converted Himachal Pradesh into Union Territory and the clock of democracy was put back in and its Legislative and popular ministry was abolished (Sharma, 1975b, p.139). However, this arrangement has thrown no impact on the pre-existing spatio-political organisation of Himachal Pradesh.

As the demands for the *Punjabi Suba* and merger of hills with Himachal were intensifying, the Jana Sangh and Maha Punjab Samiti opposed the demand of a *Greater Himachal* or a *Punjabi Suba*, fearing that the Hindus in Punjab would be reduced to minority. They pleaded for *Maha Punjab* by merging PEPSU and Himachal Pradesh with Punjab so as to make it a strong border State (Ahluwalia, 1993, p.61). The leadership of Himachal Pradesh realised the intention of the protagonists of *Maha Punjab*. To foil their designs, the Pradesh leadership decided to raise the demand of *Vishal Himachal* more vigorously and work with hill people of Punjab (Sharma, 1977, p.76).

The Himachal Pradesh Congress Committee in its memorandum demanded the merger of Kullu and Kangra with Himachal Pradesh. Similarly, the government of Himachal Pradesh pleaded for the merger of Kullu with Himachal but the merger of Kangra was left to the discretion of the people of Kangra (Ahluwalia, 1993, p.75). The hill people got an opportunity to realise their aspiration of *Vishal Himachal* when in 1965 the Union Government decided to reconsider the demand for *Punjabi Suba* on linguistic basis (Mittoo, 1993, p.45). The decision of the Union Government provided the hill people of Punjab an opportunity to forcefully voice their demand for integration with Himachal Pradesh because of cultural, social and linguistic similarities (Ahluwalia, 1993, p.76). With the Reorganisation of Punjab in 1966, the third and final stage came, when the Punjab Hill-States – the districts of Simla, Kullu, Kangra, Lahaul-Spiti; the Nalagarh areas of Ambala district; parts of Una tehsil of Hoshiarpur district; and portions of Pathankot tehsil of Gurdaspur district – were merged on 1st November 1966, with Himachal Pradesh (Singh, 1994, pp.175-158). With the

merger of these areas, the Himachal Pradesh was consolidated into culturally homogeneous and one of the spatio-structural, compact and contiguous region (See Map-1c).



On 31st July 1970, the Central Government decided to grant Statehood to Himachal Pradesh. On 18th December 1970, the State of Himachal Act was passed and the Prime Minister of India Smt. Indira Gandhi inaugurated the new eighteenth State on 25th January 1971 (Khosla, 1975b, p.129). Thus, the present shape and status of Himachal Pradesh was the result of a long struggle of 23 years in an on-going process of political development (Sharma, 1986, p.224). Lal (1970) has stated “Himachal has been granted Statehood not because of the size of population, nor because of its area but because of the need to preserve the distinctive culture entity of its people”.

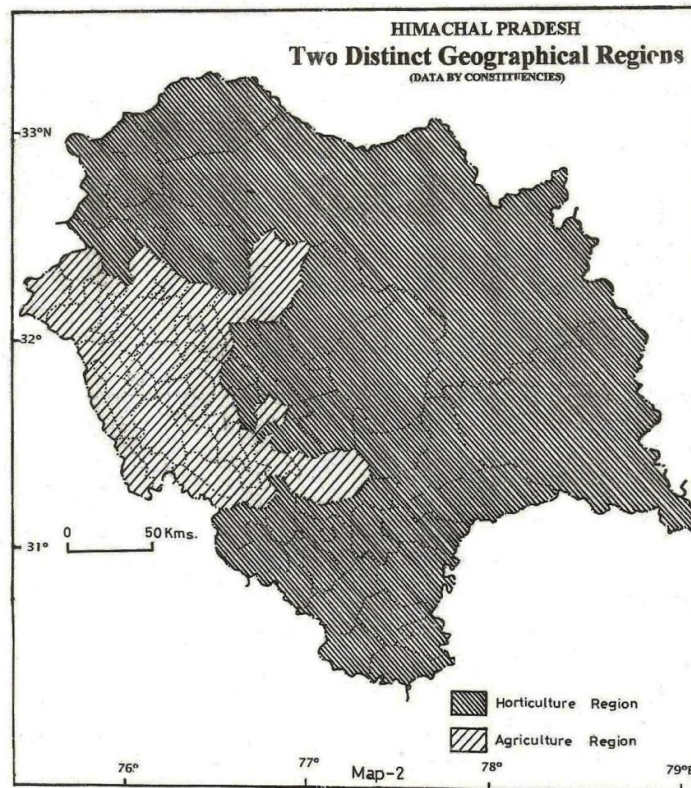
The birth of Himachal Pradesh is strongly associated with the emergence of Praja Mandals in Princely Hill-States. It was due to the active participation of Praja Mandals that the Princely Hill-States were liberated and integrated into one unit. After independence, the Congress Party has been benefited essentially due to the conversion of Praja Mandals into Congress Committee and the 23 years struggle for attainment of Statehood was one of the most important factors, which led to the strong emergence of the Congress Party in Himachal Pradesh. Hence, the Congress reaped the dividend and ruled the State for most of the time.

5. VOTING CLEAVAGES IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

For a proper understanding of the nature of electoral politics in Himachal Pradesh, it is necessary to know how the basic cleavages in the society acquired their present day shapes. It has been outlined above that the *upper* and *lower* Himachal areas were different historically. This has created a *territorial cleavage* in electoral politics in Himachal Pradesh. Economic, social and political differences in Himachal Pradesh did not create new cleavages but reinforced historically created *territorial cleavage*.

With the Reorganisation of Punjab in 1966 and the merger of Hill areas into Himachal Pradesh, a discordant element was added into the politics of the State. The *old areas* and *new areas* as these are popularly referred to, differ in their political and economic development, social structure and social mobilisation (Sindhu, 1987, p.9).

Economically, Himachal Pradesh today consists of two distinct regions: *agricultural* and *horticultural region* (See Map-2). The *agricultural region* or *lower areas* consisting of Bilaspur, Hamirpur, Kangra, and Una districts and substantial parts of Chamba, and Mandi districts constitute the former and the *horticultural region* or *upper areas* consisting of Shimla, and Kullu districts and some parts of Solan, Sirmaur, and Mandi constitute the latter. Lahaul-Spiti, and Kinnaur are high altitude areas and their suitability for agriculture as well as horticulture is equally limited (Sharma, 1986, p.264).



The economy of the *old areas* is increasingly being based on cash crops whereas the *new areas* still live largely under subsistence agriculture (Sindhu, 1987, p.10). The pattern of the land holding in two-regions is also quite different. In the *agricultural region* the size of the land holding is small, whereas in *horticultural region* the size is very large (Bhatnagar, 1986, p.212). The demographic composition in the *old* (upper hills) and *merged* (lower hills) areas of the State is markedly different (Alam, 1996, p.108).

The people of the *new areas* are more advanced in education as compared to those in the *old areas*. The middle and lower class is predominant in the *agricultural region*. The upper class also exists but its strength is comparatively insignificant. The class structure in the *horticultural region* is however different. The large orchards are owned by either traditional Thakurs or by other new affluent persons, earning in lakhs every year. In addition, there is the class of the landless rural poor who mostly work in the homes and orchards of the affluent class. The region, therefore, is dominated economically by upper class and numerically by lower class.

"The *new areas* have a long experience of the electoral politics going back to 1921, when the diarchy was introduced in Punjab, whereas the *old areas* experienced their full scale elections in 1952, though some limited or indirect election system existed even prior to this date, in the Princely States of Bilaspur, Bushahr, Mandi and Sirmaur" (Sharma, 1977, p.23).

The *old areas* has been a fortress of the Congress party and it was only in 1977 for the first time that the Congress lost election in these regions and only in the wake of this that Bharatiya Jana Sangh as part of the government formed by Janata Party succeeded in establishing a popular base for itself (Alam, 1996, p.108). The BJS was quite strong in Kangra district when it was a part of Punjab State. The party has been institutionalised in these merged areas and, hence, the merged areas have become the strong support base of the BJS/BJP as compared to the old areas of Himachal Pradesh.

The Congress Party derives its major support from the *upper areas*, therefore, all the three Chief Ministers of the Congress party namely Dr. Y.S. Parmar, Thakur Ram Lal and Raja Virbhadra Singh came from the *horticultural region*. Whereas, the BJP is strongly supported in the *lower areas*, hence, the two Chief Ministers of the party namely Sh. Shanta Kumar and Prof. Pem Kumar Dhumal came from the *agricultural region* (Chand, 1995, p.103). However, the third Chief Minister of BJP Sh. Jai Ram Thakur who assumes office of Chief Minister on 27th Dec., 2017 belongs to middle part of the State i.e. Mandi area, which has equal association to both the regions.

There is a general feeling that the *upper region* always enjoyed an edge over the *lower* one in every field because of the Congress, whose most of influential leaders belong to the *old areas*. The State government kept on following different sets of rules for both the areas and did little to extent the same facilities to the people of the *lower* belt. For example, the Gaddis and Gujars in the *lower region* have been deprived of the status of Scheduled Tribes at par with their counterparts in the rest of Himachal Pradesh for over four and half decades after independence. There have also been allegations of favouritism by the Congress governments in the matter of employment to the youths of *old* Himachal. These factors have worked towards widening the chasm between the two regions over the years, which led to the politics of regionalism in the State.

6. CONCLUSION

The present day electoral politics in Himachal Pradesh is dependant on its historical background and voting cleavages. *Lower* and *upper areas* of Himachal Pradesh are historically different because the nature and types of movements in these areas were different in pre-independence period. Large parts of upper Himachal areas were being ruled by local Princes, whereas, *lower* Himachal areas were under direct rule of Britishers. The main purpose of Praja Mandal movements in *upper* Himachal areas was to democratise rules of the local Princes. On the other hand, in *lower* Himachal areas the aim of the Freedom movement was complete independence from the British rule.

Historical differences in two regions of Himachal Pradesh are further reinforced by socio-economic differences in two types of areas. These differences have given birth to a very strong *territorial cleavage*, which influences the politics of the State to a considerable extent. This *cleavage* is being exploited by both the Congress and the BJP. The Congress Party is dominating in *horticultural* or *upper* or *old areas* and the BJP has an edge in *agricultural* or *lower* or *new areas* of the State.

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