Chapter-VI

Conclusion
Chapter 6

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The early history of Himachal Pradesh is not yet fully known. This is mainly due to the lack of adequate literary and archaeological sources. After the disintegration of Harsha’s empire, there was a great political upheaval in the north Indian plains and it become a congeries of small states. The Gurjara Pratiharas emerged as one of the leading powers here. Similarly, in the Cis-Himalayan region (between Ravi and the Yamuna), a new group of petty chiefs, known as the ‘Ranas’ and ‘Thakurs’, emerged after the collapse of the Harsha Empire in 647 A.D. They claimed to be Kshatriyas.

The period during which they ruled is known as the Apthakuri or Apthakurai, while the territory of the Ranas was called Ranhun and of a Thakur Thakuri or Thakurai. The Apthakurai period came to an end sooner in some parts of the hills than in others as a result of the foundation of the Rajput principalities in the western Himalayas by the Rajput adventures. Some of these Rajputs had come either from the plains or were the cadets of the noble families who had already established themselves in the hill areas of the present Himachal Pradesh.

The hills of Himachal Pradesh which were dotted over with numerous Rajput states, enjoyed varying degrees of independence till the eve of the Turkish invasions. Some of the hill states of Himachal Pradesh were also source of attraction due to wealth and sanctity of its temples namely Brijeshwari Mata and Jwala Mukhi temples. These were plundered by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, Muhammad Tughluq and Feroz Shah Tughluq due to the fabulous wealth they contained.
The annexation of Himachal hills, however, was never seriously thought by the Sultans of Delhi partly due to the difficult geographical conditions and partly due to the Sultans involvement in the subjugation of the plains. Thus, the hilly areas did not attract serious attention of the Sultans of Delhi and the hill states of Himachal virtually remained independent during the Sultnate period.

During the Mughal period, the political situation, however, underwent a substantial change. The hill chiefs of Himachal more or less acknowledged the suzerainty of the Mughals from Akbar onwards. Indeed, throughout the whole period of Mughal ascendancy, the hill chiefs seem to have experienced liberal and even generous treatment. So long as they did not fail in their allegiance, they were left very much to themselves in the government of their principalities, and were allowed to wield the power and exercise the functions of independent rulers. For examples, they built forts and waged war on one another, without any reference to, or interference from the emperor and sometimes even asked and received assistance in men and arms from the Mughal subedars.

Each chief, on his accession, had to acknowledge the supremacy of the emperor by the payment of a fee of investiture, after which he received a sanad or patent of installation, with a khillat from the imperial Darbar. There seems to have been much friendly relation between hill chiefs and the Mughal Court. Some of the chiefs namely, Jagat Singh, Raja of Nurpur, Mandata, grandson of Jagat Singh and Raja Ghamand Chand of Kangra gained for themselves so high a place in the favour of the emperors that they
received mansab or military rank in the Imperial army and held important offices in the state.

After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 A.D., the Mughal Empire began to decline at a rapid pace and soon it met its downfall. The Mughal power in the hills, particularly after the death of last governor, Nawab Saif Ali Khan in 1783, rapidly declined and hill chiefs took full advantage of the situation to assert their independence. But the rise of Maharaja Ranjit Singh at the close of the eighteenth century, led to the defeat of the several hill states and their annexation to Lahore Darbar. These states were ceded to the British finally in 1846 after the defeat of the Sikh which also led to an end of their domination in the hills.

After the conclusion of the Anglo-Gurkha War in 1815 A.D., most of the Simla Hill States passed under the British paramountcy. Before Anglo-Gurkha War, the British had promised to the hill chiefs, the restoration of their territories after the expulsion of the Gurkha. It was on this promise that the hill chiefs had given all the required assistance to the British in defeating the Gurkhas. To begin with, the British appeared to be less interested in acquiring the hill states. But gradually, the British departed from this practice in several ways. This departure from the declared policy was stated to be due to mis-rule, oppression of the people and non-fulfillment of the terms of the sanads and treaties by the hill chiefs. The British retained possession of some of the favourable military positions under the pretext that they were compelled to do so in the interest of the hill chiefs to enable them to maintain their guarantee of protection not only against the foreign enemy but to retain these chiefs in their territories also. In pursuance of this policy, the pargana
of Kotguru (now Kotgarh, also famous for apple), was among the first of British territorial acquisitions within the hills.

The hill chiefs, during this period, were mostly busy either settling their own internal affairs and conflicts with the native rulers or dealing with the Sikhs and their occasionally undesirable and exorbitant demands for tribute or marriages. The relations of the British with the Hill States during the period 1815-45 A.D. centred mainly around issues like complaints about the retention of territory, exchange or acquisition of territory, asylum to the chiefs, intervention on the side of the hill rulers, problems of succession and the British interventions.

It may well be imagined what results might have followed the Gurkha rule after their expulsion from the hills. The state of the country was very miserable. Most of the lands, though very fertile, were left barren. The hill-subjects, though as in their very nature, were very obliging and yielding, but the tyrannies done to them by the Gurkha army, made them very mutinous and fearless, so much so that, at the close of the Gurkha rule, it was very difficult for the Hill Chiefs to bring them to their level. The Gurkha army had no law to guide them, nor did they care for peace and prosperity. They valued their luxuries far above the rights of others, and hence their rule in the hills is regarded nothing but a plague-infection, ruinous to the hill subjects under them and eventually to themselves.

In short the rays of peace and prosperity, cast by the British Raj over the hill subjects, gave out a new light after such a dark rule of the Gurkha army.
The British policy of retaining the territories of the Kangra group of states (viz., Kangra, Guler, Jaswan, Datapur, Nurpur, Kullu and Lahaul & Spiti), led to a great disappointment as the hill chiefs of these territories had expected that after the conclusion of the first Anglo-Sikh War, their territories would be restored to them. However, it turned out to be different. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that during the second Anglo-Sikh War, these states became anti-British in their attitudes and some even openly supported the cause of the Sikhs.

However, such an arrangement of the ceded territory which deprived the hill chiefs of the chance of restoration of their dominions came to them as a bolt from the blue. They all became disaffected and when approached by the Sikh leaders in the early summer of 1848 A.D. and were astir to join the rebellion which was then maturing. They were promised that their states would be restored in the event of the British being expelled from the Himachal hills. The hill rulers who revolted in 1848 were mainly from Nurpur, Kangra, Jaswan and Datapur. The English, however, dealt with them harshly. A force was sent against the rulers of Kangra, Jaswan and Datapur under Mr. Lawrence, who secured easy surrender of them. The rebellious chiefs were captured and banished to Almora and detained as political prisoners. However, Ram Singh Pathania, the wazir of Nurpur, proved to be a difficult person to deal with. He made two attempts to throw off the oppressive rule of the British Government. For this, he entered into an understanding with the other rulers in the Kangra Hills and raised rebellion against the British.

From the account of the brave struggle of wazir Ram Singh Pathania it becomes clear that the British administrators tried to mislead the nature of his
revolt and even went to the extent of reporting to the Governor-General that Ram Singh’s conduct was more criminal than that of the Sikh chiefs. It was also asserted that wazir Ram Singh “did not join in a struggle for native independence but for self-aggrandizement”. This was a clever move on the part of the Board of Punjab Administration as their above statement was quite contrary to what Ram Singh Pathania had admitted during the course of his trial by Barnes as well as by Macleod. Be it as it may, the fact was that the Board of Administration could not actually afford to treat such a dare as Ram Singh more leniently. They, therefore, recommended that Ram Singh be imprisoned for life, and that he was to spend his remaining life in the jail in Moulmein (Burma). He died there on 11 November, 1856 at a comparatively young age, but never bent himself before the British. His name is still remembered in Himachal Pradesh as the first freedom fighter who tried to liberate Nurpur State from the British, and his exploits are sung by the hill bards.

Firstly, the internal treachery stood in the way of Ram Singh’s successful execution. Secondly, Shamsher Chand, the then ruler of Guler sided with the British and disclosed to them the whole strategy. Even the Maharaja of Jammu, Gulab Singh, also helped the British. This gave a death blow to Ram Singh’s dreams of independence.

It may be noted that the relationship between the British and the rulers of the hill states entered a new phase. With the success of the British in the Anglo-Sikh wars, we find a shift in the British attitude towards the hill chiefs. Instead of having a casual and intermittent relationship, the British now got themselves consolidated as the paramount power. The salient features of
the British overlordship included granting of sanads through which the hill chiefs were given possession over their lands but were required to fulfill certain obligations. These included payment of nazrana, military assistance and supply of begaris etc. Henceforth their rights to settle their own conflicts ceased and they were required to seek British arbitration regarding any dispute over their territories or succession issues etc.

Even since the advent of the British, the people in Himachal Pradesh had been harbouring a great deal of resentment against their rule for interference in their political and economic affairs. The people were also opposing the interference of the Government-supported Christian missionaries in their religious affairs. On the eve of the outbreak of the uprising in 1857 Captain Briggs, the Superintendent of the Hill Roads, Simla actually saw the entire hill-population seething with the feeling of revolt. The news of the Meerut and Delhi massacres reached Simla on the night of 13th May, 1857. Thus, in Simla, mutiny started on the 15th of May, 1857 when the Nasiri battalion revolted at Jutogh. On May 16, 1857 the regiment of Nasiri battalion at Kasauli also revolted and plundered the treasury and proceeded towards Jutogh by the high road to Simla. During the great revolt of 1857 Raja Shamsher Singh of Bushahr and Ram Parshad Bairagi of Subathu also became hostile to the British. Early in June 1857 Mian Partap Singh of Kullu with the help of his brother-in-law Bir Singh kindled the flames of sedition throughout the Kullu region.

These uprisings in the hills were promptly detected and suppressed by the British with great caution and tact. Their leaders Bhim Singh, Ram Parshad Bairagi, Mian Partap Singh and Bir Singh were sentenced to death.
On the other hand, most of hill chiefs and their subjects remained detached, uninterested and aloof from the nation-wide revolt of 1857 and sided with the British authorities in crushing down the uprising. However, they could not conceive or understand the idea of independence and remained under the heel of British imperialism, whereas the people who were by and large illiterate, ignorant and backward remained indifferent and unconcerned during the first war of independence.

Unfortunately, despite sufferings and sacrifices on the part of the people of Kangra, Nurpur, Nalagarh, Simla and the chief of Kullu, no positive results could be obtained, partly due to alertness and resources of the British and partly due to the lack of leadership and loyalty of the hill chiefs towards the British.

There was, however, resentment in the hills against the prevailing feudal system and its resultant oppression and injustice. The first such incident perhaps was the Dhoom agitation of the people of Rampur Bushahr who rose against the high-handedness of state officials. In Suket also uprisings against their Raja occurred in 1862 and 1877. The subjects mostly resented the overbearing administration of the relentless wazir Narotam and Dhungal. Ministerial oppression and official high-handedness was a common phenomenon in the hill states.

In Bilaspur, the agrarian discontent started from the rule of Raja Hira Chand (1850-82), because he introduced many land reforms. Raja Amar Chand (1883-88) extended the measures introduced by his father, which led to the Jhuga movement in 1884. Further, during the reign of Raja Bajai Chand (1889-1927), there was mal-administration in the Bilaspur State. He
lived extravagantly and this strained the state exchequer. The people and local nobility such as Mians, opposed many arbitrary measures of the raja which led to the revolt of 1894-95 and 1901. Again in 1930 the protest movement was started by the farmers of Bahadurpur pargana against new land settlement in Bilaspur. The farmers were apprehensive of big increase in land revenue when the settlement work commenced in 1930.

Similarly, the people of Chamba, Keonthal, Nalagarh and Mandi had also revolted against the exactions of state officials and ministers. Thus, the people of hill states had been fighting for their rights. At that time they could not think of overthrowing the feudal system and establishing a popular democratic rule. Their revolts were only protests against oppressive officials or the exactions of a Raja. These isolated attempts though failed to awaken the masses to their rights, yet these inspired some political conscious persons in the hills who became associated with the Indian National Congress and with other extremist organizations like the Ghadr Party. Mandi Conspiracy was part of the Ghadrite doings. What is really significant in the Mandi Conspiracy is that it is not merely the Ghadr party Punjabis returning from U.S. who were involved, but equally important part was also that of the local men. Rani Lalita Kumari, Haridev and Hirda Ram from these hills were among the prominent activists of the Ghadr Party.

Thus, the political awakening among the hill people came about very slowly. The autocratic rulers were not ready to give up their privileges. Nor were the people yet acquainted with the democratizing influences to the degree these were at work in British provinces. While people of India were beginning to feel the burden of alien rule and preparing by the close of the
nineteenth century to demand their rights, their brethren in the hills were yet steeped in ignorance, illiteracy and serfdom.

In 1921, Mahatma Gandhi’s visit affected Simla in two ways. Firstly, it activated local leaders into making elaborate arrangements for his welcome. News of his visit was widely circulated so that those living in Simla and its surrounding hill states could gather to hear him. Secondly, local problems and other issues viz., Begar, Reet and despotic rule of the hill rulers had been the subject of petitions and memorandums for several years, were now presented at public meetings before large audiences at the Gunj Maidan. Whereas the leader of an all-India stature sought to inform the hill people about nationalist goals, local leaders cashed in on the mood to present the issues of hill people.

During 1930-31, the processions, and violation of traffic laws and the Police Act on the Mall were expressions of the Congress attempts to make their presence felt. Local politicians freely admitted that they could never hope to replicate the upsurge possible in the plains. This was well understood by Vithalbhai Patel. His parting words to the crowds that saw him off at the railway station in Simla were a plea that the people of hill states should at least pray for the success of the movement. However, the happenings of 1930-31 were considered by local leaders as their achievement against British rule. The Indians were henceforth allowed to walk on the Mall.

The ferment caused by the happenings of 1930-31, began to trickle down to hill people and they began to make efforts to set-up people’s organizations. Whenever it was not possible to do so inside the state’s
territory in view of the Prince’s repression, the politically conscious workers
would operate from the adjoining British territories of Simla, Dalhousie etc. to
rouse the people of their states. For instance, Pt. Padam Dev of Bushahr
State made Simla as his base to launch his struggles against the rulers of the
Hill States.

The hill people’s struggle was thus directed with a specific object of
throwing off not only the British yoke but also the rule of terror, high-
handedness, slavery and feudalism of the various hill chiefs. The struggle of
the common hill people against the oppressive and unjust rule of the Princely
States in Himachal Pradesh led to several uprisings viz. ‘Dhami Goli Kand’,
‘Pajotha Agitation’, ‘Suket Satyagraha’ etc. The main objective of the
people’s struggle was the democratization of the administration and
introduction of social reforms for the people living in the hill areas.

The second quarter of the twentieth century is also marked by the
establishment of non-official organizations in the Himachal Pradesh for the
removal of social evils and redressal of the people’s grievances. The
Congress agitation in the British India and the emergence of Mahatma
Gandhi at the political scene of India, had its own repercussions on the state
people’s movement. Inspite of the oppressive rule and the ruthless tyranny of
the Indian princes, the hill people decided to stand on their own feet. They
started their work by setting up Sewa Samitis, Hitkari Sabhas, Rajput and
Brahmin Sabhas, Sewak Sanghas, Sudhar Sammelans, Prem Sabhas and
Sewa Samitis which were mostly formed in second half of the twentieth
century. These associations undertook to launch campaigns to eradicate evil
practices such as Reet, Begar, Beth, untouchability and child marriage and to encourage widow remarriage.

However, despite all efforts of these associations, not much progress was made in eradicating the custom Reet. As a result this pernicious custom of Reet with its concomitant scourge of venereal diseases continued unabated.

In Simla Hill States as well as in Punjab Hill States, another obnoxious social evil namely barda faroshi was prevalent since time immemorial. In the summer of 1924, the Himalaya Vidiya Prabandhani Sabha became seriously concerned with wiping out this social evil. Thakur Surat Singh (General Secretary, Himalaya Vidiya Prabandhani Sabha) wanted to declare illegal, barda-froshi as well as Reet. However, the British Government did not agree with him. Thakur Surat Singh did not feel discouraged and with the help of Himalaya Vidiya Prabandhani Sabha he continued his struggle for wiping out this social evil. But due to limited resources of the Sabha, he achieved only partial success.

Begar or the compulsory unpaid labour played an important role in the day-to-day conduct of the business of the state. Initially the system may have suited well to the conditions of the hill states when the requirements of the ruler were moderate, the circulation of currency was limited and the resources of the people were very meager. All persons who were settled on the land were employed by the Raja in different forms of state service. The Begar system was prevalent throughout the hill areas between the rivers Yamuna and Ravi. Several factors such as land and its ownership, local conditions, topography and needs of the people were responsible for the
evolution of the *Begar* system in the hills of Himachal. With the passage of time, this forced labour became a permanent feature and thus free service to the ruler or *zamindar* in lieu of land cultivation came to be known as *Beth-Begar*.

With the passage of time the *Begar* system became more oppressive. At the same time the people too became conscious of this evil practice. In the second quarter of the twentieth century, social, political and regional organizations as mentioned earlier were organized in the hill states to gain their political goals. These organizations also made the complete abolition of *Begar* and *Beth* as one of their goals. In this way these organizations raised political consciousness among the people of the hill states and made representations to British Government against this evil custom. As a result the British had to prepare a model policy on *Begar* and *Beth* in consultation with the rulers on the basis of enquiries in the Simla Hill States in October 1944. This model policy was adopted by all the rulers and henceforth *Begar* and *Beth* came to an end. The *Begar* system had been already abolished in Chamba, Mandi and Kangra in 1884. Paid forced labour was allowed by the British Government only when the labourers were not available.

With the independence of India the democratic process came into force in the administration all over the country. The ruler and their subjects became equal before law. Thus, the *Begar* and *Beth* system which had suppressed the people for centuries and made them live in miserable conditions was completely eradicated in Himachal Pradesh.
In the hills of Himachal Pradesh, the Praja Mandal movement contributed much to make the people of the state politically and socially awakened for active participation in the national struggle.

The formation of Praja Mandals were decided in the annual session of All India People’s Conference in 1939 in Ludhiana for organizing the political activities and awareness amongst the hill people. It disturbed the chieftains of hill states and they tried their best to suppress the Praja Mandal movement. But it also change the attitude of the Britishers as they directed these rulers to liberalize their administration and be generous to their people.

The Praja Mandals were organized for the attainment of democratic rights for the people in most of the hill states, in some places openly and in some secretly. The British Indian Government began to receive complaints of people against Begar through Praja Mandals after their organization. To rouse people it undertook to organize public meetings at the different places in various Simla Hill States, collect data about injustices and cruelties perpetrated on hill people, represent their case before the political agent and the ruler through deputations and memoranda and encourage people to refuse to pay unjust taxes and perform Begar.

Slowly the Praja Mandal movement grew active and more organized and in one of its meetings on 13 July 1939, it warned the Rana of Dhami against repression and to grant remission of half of revenue. In turn the Rana and his police resort to firing when a satyagraha was launched by the people. Two satyagrahis were killed in the incident. A similar movement was launched in Sirmaur by Kisan Sabha. But it could not take the form of revolution and the rebels were arrested and punished. A Himalayan Hill
States Regional Council (HHSRC) was formed in January 1946 to coordinate the activities of Praja Mandals. The National leaders from Delhi and other places started visiting the rebel active areas which gave an impetus to the overall Praja Mandal movement and some rulers or their associates also started supporting the cause.

When the people of hill states held their first conference of the HHSRC at Mandi in March 1946 and put a resolution of demanding a responsible government, the hill rulers unleashed a repression and took direct action against the Praja Mandalists. Doing large-scale victimization of people’s popular leaders, they imprisoned them and made a number of false cases against them. Firing was ordered in Balsan and stringent measures were also taken in Bija, Bushahr, Darkoti, Kunihar, Mandi, Mahlog and Sirmaur states.

The independence given to British India on 15 August 1947, gave an enhanced energy, force and momentum to the Praja Mandal movements in the states of Chamba, Mandi, Kangra and Simla Hills against the feudal set-up of this area. Now the just moral support of national leaders before independence got changed into concrete political support from the centre. The rulers of these principalities got panicky by this political support to the Praja Mandalists and began to plan to save their states by forming a federation. The Praja Mandal movement became more strong in areas like Arki, Bilaspur, Chamba, Dhami, Mandi, Mahlog, Sirmaur and Suket as most of them were bordering the British Indian Province of Punjab and they could easily seek refuge there whenever there was repression by the hill ruler.
The news and feeling of independence to the former British provinces of India strengthened further the demand of freedom of the hill people and merger of hill states to the Indian Union. But the rulers even after the appeals and attempts by national leaders refused the popular demand of merging the hill states with one united India. A convention of hill people held under the aegis of AISPC at Simla in January 1948 passed a resolution urging the national leaders to merge the hill state with one united India.

To attain the goal of independence of Himalayan Pranth Provincial Government was formed in February 1948 and a wide spread agitation was launched. The big states with more infrastructure were able to suppress the agitations to some extent but the smaller ones failed because of their meager resources which led to the freedom spreading more and more to the other states. The rulers tried to form a confederation in collaboration with the states of Tehri Garhwal to resist the Praja Mandal movement. But the Praja Mandal activist foiled this plan and continued their struggle with a view to secure the merger of Himalayan states with the Indian Union.

For the direct action Suket near Mandi was chosen as the first target. A satyagraha was launched and thousand of satyagrahis crossed into the Suket State on 18 February 1948 to finish of the autocratic rule of Rana. They occupied the tehsil headquarters without facing much opposition from state forces. The people of area supported the satyagrahis and subsequently liberated it from the ruler who handed over the administration to the Government of India. Not able to face the situation the ruler of Balsan and Mandi also did the same and later almost all the rulers, one by one, yield to
the popular demand and pressure of the people and agreed to integrate themselves with Indian Union.

The ruler of Rampur Bushahr resisted the satyagrahis and many died as they jumped into Sutlej river to save themselves from the barbaric police attack. One important feature of this movement was the predominant participation by the Kolis. But here also the Raja agreed on the popular demand and signed away his principality. And finally the revolutionary urge of the people for establishing a responsible government in uniting themselves with the Indian Union, succeeded.

Thus, the States of Chamba, Mandi, Suket, Sirmaur and the Simla Hill States all these were integrated into one single centrally administrative unit, after the consent of the respective rulers, into Himachal Pradesh and formed into a Chief-Commissioner's state in 1948.