CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO PARTY POLITICS IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

During the period of about 23 years (from 1948 when Himachal Pradesh first came into existence as a Union Territory till 1971 when it ultimately became a full-fledged state) the political and administrative history of Himachal Pradesh passed through a number of stages and experienced several upheavals.

Prior to 1947, the present day Himachal Pradesh was a totally different administrative organic entity. At that time, it was mainly divided into two types of hill areas: one ruled by the native princes, the other by the British. The former ones were called "Princely States", and the latter as "British Indian States". Both the areas experienced different types of socio-political movements simultaneously. The Princely states were mainly the centres of "Praja Mandals" activists, whose chief objective was to overthrow the princely rulers and replace them multiparty democratic regimes. However, the areas under the direct control of the British, made a substantial contribution to the struggle for freedom from colonial rule. These areas were then known as the "Panjab Hill States". They were made part of Himachal Pradesh in 1966, so that they are often times referred to as "New Himachal Pradesh". The main objective of the freedom fighters in the British
Indian States) was to overthrow the alien British rule. Though both the movements differed in their nature and regional perspective, yet they were not isolated from each other. Rather, both of these movements worked in close cooperation and helped each other attain their respective objectives. The "Praja Mandal workers participated in the various agitations and struggles launched in the British areas and members of the various political organizations in the British areas crossed over to the state territories to help the Praja Mandal workers in their agitations" (Sharma 1975:110). Uprisings and agitations in the British-controlled areas had direct bearing on the political movements that were taking place in the adjoining princely states. "The Mandi conspiracy in 1914-15 was the result of the influence of some members of "Ghadr Party" who had returned from America and had been carrying on revolutionary work in Panjab" (Sharma, 1975:110).

Prior to the Praja Mandal movements in Himachal Pradesh, there were many associations which undertook to launch campaigns to eradicate social evils like untouchability, child marriage, problem of widow remarriage, and begar system (a system of rendering services without any material benefit) in the state. With the passage of time, the hill people began to look upon begar and other levies as unjust. With a call for abolition of such impositions political consciousness amongst the hill people grew. However, due to drastic repressive measures political
activities could only take the course of fits and starts till the end of 1930's, when the "Himalaya Riasti Praja Mandal" was organized which helped the people become aware about the injustices which they had been meted out for centuries. By organizing public meetings at different places in the state, this organization directed the activities of the political and social workers. It also encouraged people not to pay unjust taxes nor to do begar. Simultaneously, praja mandals were organized in Chamba, Sirmur, Mandi, Bushahr and other small hill states.

The other landmark of the Praja Mandal struggle included the "Bhai Do, Na Pai" movement, which was started at the beginning of the Second World War. It was a movement of civil disobedience and boycott, wherein the people were obliged not to make voluntary contributions for the war efforts nor to pay land revenue nor to be recruited for the execution of war by the British. As a consequence of it the Praja Mandal workers were arrested in a large number. To arouse the feelings of agricultural community against the British and to protect them from the highhandedness of state officials, a "Kisan Sabha" was organized at Pajhota. The Pajhota agitation which is regarded as an extention of the Quit India Movement of 1942 began its protest by starting satyagraha and non-cooperation movement. However, this agitation was "ruthlessly suppressed by confiscating the properties of some workers, by dynamiting the houses of others and making large-scale arrests" (Sharma, 1975: 112).
Later in 1946, these praja mandals were assimilated into the Himalyan Hill State's Regional Council, an affiliate of the All India State's People Conference. Having thus amassed the strength, the Regional Council announced its decision to fight for the establishment of a separate hill state having common historical traditions, cultural homogeneity, linguistic unity and geographical continuity. This announcement came at a time when the hill princes also devised a scheme confederating all the hill states into a composite administrative unit. "Though the object of setting up of a separate hill state was identical, yet there were differences about the extent of responsible and democratic government for the people and the mode of the affiliation of this hill state with India" (Sharma, 1975: 113). To achieve its goals of a responsible government and complete elimination of princes, the Regional Council under the presidency of Pandit Shiva Nand Ramaul established a provisional government of the Himalyan Prant and decided to launch a satyagraha of which Suket was the first target. The non-violent attack on Suket, launched on February 18, 1948, proved a great success and resulted in the take over of the state of Suket by the Government of India. According to Dr. Parmer, "Never in the history of any Satyagraha movement had people undertaken a struggle of such magnitude in spite of the lack of means of communication and bad weather" (Sharma, 1975: 113). This paved way for the accession of other
princely hill states which were ultimately conglomerated into a Chief Commissioner's Province on 15 April 1949 with the name of Himachal Pradesh.

After the Anglo-Sikh War of 1846, the British rulers took Kangra, Kulu and their subsidiary states under their direct control, due to their key strategic positions. "The British rulers were very sensitive to any growth of feelings of nationalism in these areas and were extra-vigilant to curb and suppress any national movement. However, all their measures and precautions could not prevent the spread of nationalist feelings, especially after Mahatama Gandhi took steps to transform the Indian National Congress into an organization of the masses and launched his non-violent non-cooperation movement in 1920. A number of hillmen studying and doing odd jobs in Lahore and other cities in the plains came under the influence of Gandhi's call and returned to their native places to organize branches of the Congress. Numerous workers began to be enrolled and Congress committees began to be set up in villages and cities" (Sharma, 1975: 114). By 1930, the freedom movement had penetrated deeply and firmly laid its foundation in Kangra and the participation of people in the civil disobedience movement was awe-inspiring. The British met this sort of an upsurge with a strong hand as a consequence of which the movement showed signs of inactivity but it re-gained momentum in view of the Congress party's decision to contest the 1937 election to the Legislative
Assemblies. In fact, with the participation of the Congress in the elections, the national movement spread to every corner of the Kangra district.

When the Congress Ministries resigned because of the British government's decision of involvement of India in the Second World War and the consequent decision of the Congress to launch a nation-wide stir, Kangra was not far behind. Further, when the British initiated the process of recruitment to the Indian Army in Kangra, the workers of the freedom movement under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, dissuaded from joining the Army. Once again political leaders were arrested. It, however, could not halt the process as the people responded enthusiastically towards the "Quit India" movement launched by the Congress in 1942. The hill people continued their struggle for freedom along with the people of other parts of the sub-continent until August 15, 1947.

At the time of independence the area presently constituting the state of Himachal Pradesh was almost equally divided between the British Indian States and the territory of Indian states. The latter, besides a few enclaves of Patiala, was again equally divided between the five Panjab Hill States of Chamba, Mandi, Suket, Bilaspur and Sirmur and the 27 Shimla Hill States. However, "Independence brought about a dramatic change in the hill states. With their British protectors gone, the rulers could no longer suppress popular leaders...nor could they ignore
the wishes of the people...The rulers, therefore, made a belated attempt to come to terms with their people. In the months after Independence ruler after ruler declared his intention to introduce "reforms" or even responsible government within his territory" (Khosla, 1975a: 117). But such reforms could not solve the basic problem of fitting these states into the political structure of independent India. But "they were too small to be made separate units of the federation. Therefore, either they would have to be merged in Panjab or some sort of a large union would have to be created by merging them together" (Khosla, 1975a: 117).

**Merger of Smaller Hill-States with Panjab**

As we have already noted that in the so-called Himachal Pradesh there were many areal units which were too small and too poor to exist as independent states and sooner or later they would have to merge in the Indian dominion. Under such circumstances, merger of these small areal units with the the Panjab state seemed to be the easiest and natural solution. This was thought in view of the fact that historically also the hill states had remained in touch with the Panjab culture. However, the merger could not take place as two considerations came in the way of merger: "One was that the princes and the people alike were strongly opposed to merger in Panjab. The people had developed a strong dislike to the Panjabi officials who, in the time of the rajas, had suppressed them for centuries...The other reason arose out of conditions in Panjab itself. The partition of
the country had completely disrupted its administration and economy and it was faced with the gigantic task of rehabilitating millions of refugees. The hill areas would require huge resources for their development and Panjab, under the circumstances, was not in a position to provide them. Thus a merger with Panjab was not feasible due to political, administrative and financial reasons" (Khosla, 1975a: 118).

On the one hand merger of the states with Panjab could not become possible, on the other princes of the "Pahari" society (who from the very beginning were against such a merger) called a constituent assembly to frame a constitution for the union. "The assembly met at Solan from 26 to 28 January 1948 under the chairmanship of Raja Durga Singh of Baghat (Solan). But the assembly was confined to the Shimla Hill States only. The Panjab Hill States did not participate. The assembly decided to constitute a Union of States. It was named as Himachal Pradesh and, on 1 March 1948, the Government of India was informed that the union had already been constituted" (Khosla, 1975a: 118). However, most of the Prajamandalists were against such a move. As Dr. Y.S. Parmer in his January 25, 1948 meeting at Shimla stated:

the proposed union would be acceptable only if power was transferred to the people and if individual states ceased to exist and a consolidated Himalayan province was created by amalgamating them.
Such moves of prajamandalists made the princes of the Hill-States restive who were all out to materialise their efforts for the creation of the union. But, with the joint efforts of Pandit Padam Dev, Dr. Parmer, and Sardar Patel, the efforts of princes could not become fruitful rather they were deprived of their state which, on 15 April 1948, was constituted into the Chief Commissioner's Province of Himachal Pradesh.

As a Chief Commissioner's Province, the experience of Himachal Pradesh was far from happy. Himachal Pradesh, therefore, came under bureaucrats who, since were not accountable to the people directly, paid little heed towards the problems of the people and in their resolution. Although an Advisory Council was set up on September 30, 1948 to assist the chief-commissioner but even this council failed to matter much as its recommendations were not binding on him. Even the constituent assembly, upon which peoples' eyes were keenly set, failed to provide a solace and left them in a fluid situation. In view of it the constitution makers did not favour a change in the existing pattern of governance of the state. As Pandit Nehru also observed in the Constituent Assembly that "It is far better to deal with it in a way which is capable of further change, i.e., by Act of Parliament than by fixed provisions in the Constitution" (Khosla, 1975a: 119-120).
Himachal Pradesh as a part "C" state:

With the inauguration of the Constitution on 26 January 1950, Himachal Pradesh became a Part "C" state. However, the state leaders continued their struggle for the statehood. "Dr. Y.S. Parmar, along with leaders of other Part "C" states, waged the battle inside and outside the Parliament. This led to the passage, in September 1951, of the Government of Part "C" States Act, which conceded responsible government of a limited character to Himachal Pradesh along with some other Part "C" states. Elections to the 36-member Vidhan Sabha created under the new act were held in November 1951. The Congress won 24 seats and the first popular ministry headed by Dr. Y.S. Parmar was sworn in on 24 March 1952" (Khosla, 1975a: 120-121). Besides implementing the First Five Year Plan through which a number of developmental and relief programmes were launched, the ministry, on the political front, won a big success when it succeeded in convincing the centre of the appropriateness of merging Bilaspur in Himachal Pradesh.

1. Before the Seventh Amendment (State's Reorganisation Act of 1956) in the Constitution, India had three types of states; Part-A; Part-B; and Part-C. Part-A states were the former provinces and included: Assam, Bihar, Bombay, Madhya Pradesh, Madras, Orissa, the Panjab, United Provinces, and West Bengal. Part-B states included five union of states (Madhya Bharat, Patiala and PEPSU, Rajasthan, Saurashtra, and Travancore-Cochin) and Hyderabad, Kashmir and Mysore. Part-C states were administered by the President of India, through a Chief Commissioner or Lieutenant Governor. These were: Bhopal, Ajmer, Bilaspur, Cooch-Behar, Coorg, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Kutch, Manipur, and Tripura.
While the state was busy in the implementation of the First Five Year Plan, a bigger state in the neighbourhood was planning to annihilating its very existence. Towards the close of 1952 there were rumours that Panjab had sought the integration of Himachal Pradesh and PEPSU in it. It was also heard that Panjab had already talked with the central government over this issue. Although such a thing could not happen immediately, but ultimately the rumours proved to be correct.

The majority verdict of the States Re-organisation Commission, in their report which was submitted on September 30, 1955, recommended Himachal’s merger in Panjab though its chairman, Justice Fazl Ali, recorded a note of dissent and recommended its retention as a separate entity. To the people of Himachal, the verdict came as a bolt from the blue. They realised that "...Time had come for the start of the grim battle for the retention of the Pradesh as a separate entity on the map of India. The battle was fought under the leadership of the indomitable Dr. Y.S. Parmar,...[who] was able to convince Pandit Nehru" (Khosla, 1975a: 122), of the necessity of granting Himachal Pradesh a separate statehood.

Keeping in view the strong feelings of the people of Himachal Pradesh, the government of India conceded to maintain the separate identity of the Pradesh, but it had to pay a heavy price for this concession. This was because the
commission recommended a uniform principle that their should be either states or union territories. Since no exception to this general principle could be made in the case of Himachal Pradesh, the people had no alternative but to accept the status of a union territory. Consequently, on the very next day of 31st October 1956, after Y.S. Parmar's statement that "No sacrifice is too great to save Himachal Pradesh", it became a Union Territory, a position wherefrom the Pradesh started its journey towards statehood.

As a union territory, Himachal Pradesh could not achieve its long desired status of a full-fledged state. With its reversion to the status of a union-territory, the legislative power of Himachal Pradesh, which was granted to it in 1951, came to be vested in the hands of Parliament. Besides, it came to be directly administered by the President through a nominee known as Lieutenant Governor. However, a committee of Vidhan Sabha was formed in April 1956 to negotiate with the central government regarding the granting of democratic set up to Himachal Pradesh. The committee could get the clause-239 in the Constitution Act of 1956 (relating to the administration of union territories) favourably altered "in such a way as to retain in the hands of the Parliament power to legislate for the government of union territories through an act of Parliament. The original clause in the bill provided for the union territories only an advisory council whereas as a result of this change legislatures and ministries could also be provided if the
parliament so chose. In spite of this enabling clause, however, the Parliament did not choose to establish responsible government in union territories" (Khosla, 1975b: 123). In place of it in December 1956, the Parliament passed Territorial Council Act on the basis of which a Territorial Council on the model of a district board was set up in Himachal Pradesh, as in other union territories. This system was a sort of dyarchy which was introduced by the British in the provinces under the Government of India Act 1919. Resultantly elections were held in May-June 1957 and the Congress was voted to power. The council of Himachal Pradesh had 41 elected and nominated members at that time.

It was, however, quite unfortunate that the same leaders who witnessed the failure of the Dyarchy system when it was implemented under the Government of India Act 1919 found merits in this system after some four decades later. And despite the fact that the system was put in to operation with all enthusiasm and zeal, its results were not at all encouraging. One essential fallout of the system was the duplicity of administrative control, which, besides involving double expenditure, rendered the administrative acts uncoordinated and thus to work at cross purposes. Moreover, the Territorial council was entrusted with the responsibility of administering the affairs of the departments of the Education, Public Health and Public Works and in that also the Council was "charged with task of implementation only, policy-formulation being done by the administration. Implementation, in its turn, suffered
because financial control lay with the administrator. The whole system, in short, was disorganised, dilatory and wasteful" (Khosla, 1975b:124). All this, besides having a negative impact on the administration as a whole, brought the ruling Congress party in sharp criticism.

In order to save its skin in the forthcoming general election, therefore, the party formed a Negotiating Committee under the chairmanship of Dr. Y. S. Parmar in December 1959 to take up the matter with the Central Government and the party leadership. The central government responded to it by appointing an official committee which was headed by Ashoke K. Sen, the then Union Law Minister, to go into the issue of union territories. The committee gave its report in June 1962, recommending that more subjects be transferred to the territorial council, without giving it a full democratic set-up.

But the people of Himachal Pradesh continued their struggle as the reward fell too short of their expectations. In view of it the central government decided to go beyond the recommendations of the Ashoke K. Sen Committee and passed the Constitution (Fourteenth Amendment) Act, 1962 and the Government of Union Territories Act, 1963. By the passage of these Acts, the Himachal Territorial Council was converted into a legislative assembly and a popular ministry headed by Dr. Parmar was formed which was sworn in on 1st July 1963.
The newly constituted popular ministry gave top priority to the issue of development and the re-ordering of priorities for the third Five Year Plan which was formulated under the rule of the administrator. Meanwhile, the issue of re-organization of Panjab was raised by the Akalis who became united and gathered strength owing to the exit of the strongman of Panjab, Pratap Singh Kairon from the scene.

Meanwhile the voice in favour of reorganisation of Panjab and PEPSU on linguistic lines became so pronounced, and to some extent outrageous, that the central government was compelled to appoint a Committee (September 1965) under the chairmanship of Sh. Hukam Singh, the then Speaker of Lok Sabha, to report on the problem. The committee favoured the linguistic reorganisation of Panjab, to give effect to which a "Boundary Commission" was appointed in April 1966 which gave its recommendations in October 1966. The case for the merger of Panjab Hill Areas into Himachal Pradesh was forcefully pleaded, among others, by the chief-minister Dr. Y.S. Parmar and by Satya Vati Dang, the president of the Himachal Pradesh Congress Committee before the Panjab Boundary Commission. Consequently, despite the counter claims by both Panjab and Haryana, the claim of Himachal Pradesh was conceded to.

Basing the recommendations of the Hukam Singh Committee and the Panjab Boundary Commission, the Government of India, besides reorganising Panjab into two states of Haryana and Panjab, favoured the decided integration of the Panjab Hill areas of the districts of Kangra, Shimla, Kullu...
and Lahaul-Spiti, Nalgarh area of Ambala district, parts of Una tehsil of Gurdaspur district, and of Pathankot tehsil of the Gurdaspur district in Himachal Pradesh.

The frustration of the people of Himachal (which was caused due to the denial of statehood) was, to some extent, relieved by the fact that the Pradesh did acquire a proper shape and identity. Thus having become a well-knit geographical unit, the Pradesh was now ready to embark on yet another round of its offensive for statehood.

The final struggle for demanding the conferring of statehood was launched on 24th January 1968 when Himachal Pradesh legislative Assembly passed an unanimous resolution which stated:

This House earnestly feels that it is high time for Himachal Pradesh to be recognised as a full fledged state and to that end, it strongly urges that the Central leadership and the Union Government concede the demand of the Pradesh for statehood by bringing about the necessary legislations without further loss of time.

This matter was taken up by the Himachal Pradesh Congress Committee and the Pradesh Government with the All India Congress Committee and the Central Government. A Negotiating Committee was also constituted under the chairmanship of Professor Tapinder Singh for this purpose.

"The main points on which the case was built included the assurance given by Sardar Patel at the time of the formation of the Pradesh and by his successor in the Ministry of
States, Gopalswamy Ayyangar; the enlarged size and population of the Pradesh; the remarkable progress made by it in increasing its resources and in attaining financial viability, and the need for removing administrative and constitutional bottlenecks that stood in the way of rapid development. The Centre, however, preferred to remain convinced and did not go beyond a vague assurance that when the Pradesh obtains "the conditions of financial viability we would not hesitate to give it statehood" (Khosla, 1975b:128).

Coupled with this, attitude of the bureaucracy especially of the Home Ministry officials, that exercise immense power and patronage in the administration of a Union Territory, also came in the way of getting the demand for statehood accepted at the central level.

At this stage, however, the efforts of Dr. Parmer and some other members in the Parliament, bore fruits as their resolutions on the demand for statehood received overwhelming support and things ultimately settled after prolonged discussions when the Prime Minister made an announcement to this effect in the Parliament on 31st July 1970. On 18th December 1970, the state of Himachal Pradesh Act was passed by the Parliament and Himachal Pradesh was inaugurated on 25th January 1971 as the 18th state of the Indian federal union.
POLITICAL PARTIES:

Like in many states of the Indian union, the political process in Himachal Pradesh, in its initial stages remained slow. (Table 2.1) However, with the conversion of Praja mandals into the Congress committees, the sphere of political activity widened. In fact, during the course of party building in the state "...the Praja Mandals gradually came to be woven into the fabric of one organization, namely, the Himalayan Hill State's Regional Council. This organization became the basis for raising the superstructure of the party system of Himachal Pradesh. The transformation of the organization into Himachal Pradesh Congress Committee came about in May-June 1948..." (Sharma, 1977:24).

The transformation of praja mandals into the Congress committees along with grant of universal suffrage and declaration of First Vidhan Sabha (Assembly) election in 1952, brought the Himachali people, all of a sudden, into the mainstream of the country's democracy. Due to one party dominance, however, the state could not provide a healthy political party system and lacked competitive politics for a long time.

The political party system of Himachal Pradesh is mainly a two-party system, as the contest for political power in the state is mainly restricted to the Congress and the BJP. The other political parties in the state are mere non-entities, as their influence on the state's body politic is rather limited. BJP as a party of mass electoral appeal appeared on the scene only during the late 1980s. In fact,
barring the Congress and the BJP, most of the political parties disappeared from the electoral scene with time, though the Communists still have some area under their sway.

Table 2.1: People's participation in Himachal Pradesh Assembly Elections: 1952-1993.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election Year</th>
<th>Participation Rate (in %)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
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<td>1967</td>
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<td>67.9</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>71.8</td>
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The first assembly election in the state were held in 1952 which "...encouraged the neo-political leaders who [were] often characterized as "Climbers" for the[ir] use of the democratic institution as an outlet for their aspiration for power and status" (Gupta, 1976:119). The elections were held for the 36 assembly seats for which 173 candidates were in the electoral fray. The participation rate was only 25.2 per cent. The Congress, out of the total 36, won 24 seats. The opposition parties did not prove to be a significant force in the state. Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party and Scheduled Caste Federation got only three and one seats
respectively. Along with these party candidates, eight non-party candidates were also returned to their seats (Table 2.2).

With the integration of hill areas of the erstwhile Panjab in 1966, the party politics in the state of Himachal got metamorphosed. Now the share-holders among whom the "political power cake" was to be distributed were two. Henceforth, the distribution of power between the "old" and the "new" Himachal became the major issue of politics. This cleavage is not only still alive, but the electoral victories of both the Congress and the BJP are largely determined by it.

Congress party

The political scene in Himachal Pradesh was purely dominated by the Congress till early 1980s, as the party emerged on the state's political scene under such circumstances which no other political party could enjoy.

The merger of praja mandals into the Congress committees provided Congress a readymade electoral base.

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2. Ever since "the state of Himachal Pradesh was created, the upper hills [old Himachal] leadership of the ruling [Congress] party had been dominating the political scene. Except for a brief interlude from 1977 to 1979, when Mr. Shanta Kumar, who hails from the lower areas, headed the Janata government, the state government has been led by men from the upper hills or "old" Himachal region". For "old" and "new" Himachals leadership rivalry and factionalism in the state, see, Najim-UL-Hasan (April 22, 1990:8).
Praja-mandals which worked in the state for years to eradicate social evils, like child marriage, begar-system, etc. made deep inroads for the Congress. The support of the majority of princes and upper-caste people helped the Congress in building its support base further.

Though until 1967 assembly election, the political scene in the state remained more or less peaceful, but since then factionalism grew at a rampant pace. Until 1977 assembly election, rivalry in political leadership of the party was between Dr. Y.S. Parmeir and Comrade Ram Chander, Padam Dev, Thakur Karam Singh and Vidhya Dhar. Whereas, since 1980, party leadership is largely restricted to Vir Bhader Singh, Sukh Ram and Sat Mahajan.

Bharatiya Janata Party

Right from the beginning, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (earlier incarnation of the BJP) was an opponent to the very idea of creation of a separate hill state, namely the Himachal Pradesh. This factor has contributed significantly in restricting the mass-appeal of the party in the pradesh in the initial stages. Coupled with this factor, there are certain other reasons which kept the mass appeal of the party limited in the pradesh. The first among these is the deliberate ignorance by the party headquarter in establishing organizational units in the countryside Himachal Pradesh, so that the party worked as an appendage of the Panjab Bharatiya Jana Sangh for a period of 16 years.
Secondly, in contrast to Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, where they were aligned either to the BJS or the Swantantra party, the princes in Himachal Pradesh were associated with the Congress.

Janata Party

Janata Party appeared on the state political scene on the eve of 1977 general election. By winning 53 seats, out of the total 68, it was voted to power with an absolute majority. Shanta Kumar was elected as the leader of the party. However, the assembly could not complete its tenure of five years, due to party’s failure at the national level.

Janata Dal

Janata Dal appeared on the national political scene against the policies of the Congress and the Bofors scandal during the Rajiv Gandhi’s period. It came into existence in 1989 and participated in the 1990 assembly election in the state as an independent party. It won as many as eleven seats in 1990 election, however, could not win even a single seat in 1993 assembly election.

Electoral Politics: Performance of Congress & BJP

Till 1982 assembly election, the electoral scene in Himachal Pradesh was purely dominated by the Congress party. However, things have changed to a large extent with the emergence of Bharatiya Janata Party in 1982 assembly election. BJP has given a two-party structure to the state.
Table 2.2: Electoral Performance of political parties in Himachal Pradesh, Assembly Elections: 1952-1993.

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<td><strong>TOTAL SEATS</strong></td>
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Congress party

The graphic display of the Congress party's vote and seats won from 1952 to 1993 assembly elections (Fig. 2.1) clearly exhibits that excepting 1977 and 1990 assembly elections, the party always gets benefit from the huge positive electoral bias. In contrast to the B.J.P., whose vote percentage share, on an average, is on the upward trend, the Congress has shown many ups and downs since the 1952 assembly election. In the 1952 assembly election, the party polled 47.3 per cent vote, however, it was able to win 69.29 per cent (24) seats out of the total 36. In the 1957 assembly election, the party registered 21 victories (out of the
Vote-Seat Relationship in respect of Congress
1952 - 1990

Fig. 2.1
Vote-Seat Relationship in respect of B.J.P.
1957 - 1990
total 41 seats) by polling 48.26 per cent vote. In the 1962 assembly election, by polling 51.5 per cent vote and acquiring 79.63 per cent seats, the party further strengthened its stronghold. However, in 1967 election, the strength of the Congress party dwindled. Its per cent vote share decreased from 51.5 per cent in 1962 to 42.19 per cent and the party could win only 34 (56.67 %) seats. In fact, "The continuing rising prices, the recurring shortage of essential commodities, the near-famine conditions in the Pradesh and an uneasy outlook for the future bred, resentment and hostility among the various sections of the society (the producers, the consumers and the house-wives)" (Gupta, 1976:116), led to an erosion of Congress image and prestige. In the 1977 election, the party with a vote share of 27.7 per cent could win only nine out of the total 68 seats. This all happened due to the anti-Congress and pro-Janata wave at that time. In the next two assembly elections of 1982 and 1985, the party increased its tally in terms of both vote gained and seats won. The party had to face an all-round defeat in the 1990 assembly election, when by polling 36.94 per cent vote it won nine (out of the total 68) seats. However, the party regained the seat of power with thumping majority (by winning 52 out of the total 68 seats) in 1993.

After the debacle of 1990 assembly election, a meeting was held, in Shimla, by Himachal Pradesh Congress Committee (HPCC) to identify the causes of party's humiliating defeat. The meeting was attended by members of
Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC), former legislators, District Congress Committee (DCC) members, presidents and secretaries of various Congress organizations. They found the following factors which led to the party's defeat in the February election (Times of India, March 29, 1990:3):

1. Spokesmen of both NSUI (National Student Union of India) and Youth Congress were of the view that they were not only totally ignored over government politics but were left like unwanted child or orphans. They also said "when our own leaders were unwilling to listen to us how could anyone expect that people would have listened to us..."

2. Party failed to communicate its policies and programmes to the people as "...no organization left to play the vital role to link the people and the government".

3. A section of the party blamed the former chief minister, Mr. Virbhadra Singh, who did not paid "sufficient attention to the political needs" of the new Himachal (an euphemism for Kangra and the adjoining districts of Hamirpur and Una, which have a combined strength of 38 legislators in a House of 68).

4. Had Mr. Sat Mahajan not been torpedoed, the party could have secured more seats than it actually did in Kangra, Bilaspur, Chamba, Hamirpur and Una districts.
5. Some believe the "desire for change" coupled with communalisation of politics that was responsible for the party's rout at the polls.

Though the Congress went for the 1993 assembly election as a faction-ridden party but romped the house with a three-fourth majority due to a strong anti-BJP current in a "no-wave" election. The Congress won 52 out of the total 68 seats. However, the Congress which was a divided house before the election, continued to do so thereafter. The elected MLAs belong to two camps, one headed by Virbhadra Singh, who had the support of 30 MLAs. Whereas the other group was headed by Union Minister for Communications, Sukh Ram, with the backing of 22 MLAs. Sukh Ram was considered close to the Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao.

Though there were others who had been in the race of Chief-Ministership, including Ram Lal and Vidya Stokes (but her chances were considerably diminished with her defeat from the Theog). The seven elected independents, who were all Congress rebels, five backed Virbhadra Singh and deviated the scale decisively in Singh's favour. And even Panjab Chief-Minister Beant Singh, one of the party observers, for Himachal Pradesh, conceded that Virbhadra Singh alone commanded a majority.
Bharatiya Janata Party

The real electoral showing of the Bharatiya Janata Party in the state of Himachal Pradesh began only with the 1967 assembly election. The graphic display of the BJP's per cent vote show that barring the assembly elections of 1972 and 1993, the vote percentage share of the party has been on the upward trend (Fig. 2.2). In the first assembly election held--after the creation of the state--in 1972, the party by polling 7.98 per cent vote, could win only five seats, out of the total 68 seats. The party did not participate in the assembly election of 1977 as an independent entity and was a part of the Janata Party--of which 53 candidates were returned to their seats. The 1982 assembly election was a turning point in the party's state electoral history. The party by polling 35.33 per cent registered 29 electoral victories, out of the total 68 seats. In fact, it was from this assembly election that the BJP gave a clear cut bi-polar view to the state politics. In the 1985 assembly election, though the party's per cent vote increased from 35.33 per cent in 1982 to 35.72 per cent, the party could win only seven seats. With the 1990 assembly election, the state's political situation totally got moulded in favour of the party. In this election, the party by polling 55.87 per cent vote, won as many as 51 seats out of the total 68. The party was voted to power with such a thumping majority due to anti-Congress and Ram wave. However, the party's efforts to regain the seat of power in
the state could not fruitalise and it could retain only eight seats, its lowest ever tally since the creation of the state. BJP was thrown out of the power due to unpopular decisions. Even Shanta Kumar (BJP government Chief Minister) admitted it and said "we have been punished for certain perceived anti-people decisions". Ramesh Vinayak (1993:44) for India Today, described how Bharatiya Janata Party was defeated against the faction-ridden-lightweights dominated Congress party:

1. Ram temple and the Hindutva card were absent from the scene and "...even among BJP voters (only 11 per cent...mentioned it as the main factor influencing their vote". Predominantly, local-bread-and-butter issues influenced voting behaviour.

2. With its unpopular decisions, BJP had alienated two influential sections of the state: government employees, and apple-growers. Party's policy of "no-work, no pay" annoyed 1.60 lakh employees. And as nearly household in the state has one or more members in government service, the BJP's stance cost it dearly. BJP was also found mishandling the apple-growers stir. After becoming Chief-Minister, Shanta Kumar reduced the support price of apples and vegetables leading to an agitation in the state. Many people, were killed in police firing at Kotagarh, Nahan, Una, Mandi, Chamba and some places in Kangra.
3. BJP committed a tactical blunder by fielding all its 48 MLAs in the dissolved assembly, as only four of the 48 won,

4. BJP could not capitalise the Congress party's inherent tussle over party tickets between PCC(I) chief Virbhadera Singh and Union Minister of State, Sukh Ram.

5. Shanta Kumar's decision to challenge the Mandal report in the Supreme Court, pushed the backwards, the schedule castes, and schedule tribes towards the Congress. As BJP got only two out of total 19 reserved constituencies in the state.