

The Whole Truth About Himachal

The difference between *Truth* and the *Whole Truth* is best illustrated by the oft repeated comment that Himachal Pradesh is the fallout of the Punjabi Suba agitation. This is true, but it does not take into account the aspirations and the struggles of the people of the princely states for participatory democracy and the merger of the states with the Union of India. In fact, even though the Congress had been supporting the activities of the AISPC (Praja Mandal) it was only in the Haripura session of the Congress in 1938 under the leadership of Subhash Bose, that 'states were declared as an integral part of India, whose Purna Swaraj was as much its object, as for the rest of India. In 1939 the idea of forming Praja Mandals was conceived in the session of "All India State Peoples' Conference" at Ludhiana, and the 'Himalayan Riasti Praja Mandal' was made responsible for directing the activities of the political workers in Chamba, Sirmaur, Mandi, Bushahr, Sundernagar and other princely states. It was a daunting task, as they were dependent for their *gaddi* – not on the goodwill of the people, but the patronage of the Raj.

As independence drew closer, the rulers of the Hill states met in Delhi in January 1948 and proposed a Union of states for the Himalayan region, but when the Raja of Mandi called on the Mahatma, he advised them to call a meeting of the Praja Mandals and the rulers to deliberate on this. A meeting was indeed held at Solan later than month, but it was confined to the Shimla Hill states only, but the name Himachal Pradesh was coined here. Because of the opposition of the dominant faction of Praja Mandal led by Dr YS Parmar, the Ministry of States (under Patel and Menon) refused to acknowledge its formation, and the Praja Mandal supporters started an agitation for the merger of the states with the Union of India (rather than amalgamation on the lines of PEPSU). The Raja of Suket, Lakshman Sen was to first to capitulate, and all others, with the exception

of Bilaspur, viz Chamba, Mandi, Bushahr and its tributaries Kaneti and Delath; Keonthal and its tributaries Koti, Theog, Madhan, Ghund and Ratesh; Baghat, Jubbal with its tributaries Rawin and Dhadi; Kumarsain, Bhajji, Mahlog, Balsan, hami, Kuthar, Kunihar, Mangal, Beja, Darkoti, Tharoch, Sangri and Sirmaur followed suit. This led to the formation of the Chief Commissioner's Province of Himachal Pradesh but this was not to the liking of Dr Parmar who felt that unlike other parts of the country, those in the forefront of the freedom movement were being denied the role of political leadership. Three years later, a partial democratic setup was introduced with a legislative Assembly with limited powers under Lt Governor, but under the control of the President of India. The first Lieutenant Governor of Himachal was Major General Himat Singhji, a royal from Nawanagar who was also a distinguished sportsman and cricketer

Another important milestone in the consolidation of Himachal was the merger of Bilaspur in 1954. Its Ruler, Aman Chand had insisted on being the first Chief Commissioner, and the Government of India conceded this point as the Bhakra Nangal site was in Bilaspur.

However, it was still a truncated Himachal, as Shimla, the summer capital of India from 1864 to 1947, as well as of East Punjab from 1947 to 1960, besides the hill areas of Kangra, Kullu, Lahaul and Spiti were still under Punjab. Most of the Dogra Paltan of the British army was recruited from this region.

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of Independence, *Begar* (compulsory labour without any payment) was abolished, *Bethu* (free service to the landlord in lieu of home stead land) was regulated and the pernicious practice of *Reet* – state sanctions and tax for purchase of women for purposes of matrimony – was banned. The introduction of commercial crops like apple and potato brought about a major change in the agricultural economy of the state.

As mentioned earlier, the SRC Report of 1955 caused a major consternation in the hills as the majority verdict sought its merger with Punjab. However the Chairman of the Commission Fazl Ali in his dissenting note said that given the communal situation and the law and order problem in Punjab, it made better sense for this region to retain its identity. However the fear of a potential merger with Punjab continued to haunt the people of Himachal till the Punjab Boundary Commission headed by Justice Shah recommended that the district of

Kangra, Shimla, Lahaul, Spiti besides the Una tehsil of Hoshiarpur in Punjab should be transferred to Himachal on account of geographical continuity and lingual affinity.

The territorial consolidation of the state was complete by 1966, but it took another five years for the ultimate dream of the hill people to have their own state, and finally after unanimous resolution of the Himachal Assembly house for the transition from the UT to a state was adopted by the Union Parliament, and Himachal became a state one day before the twenty first anniversary of the Indian Republic!