

## **Uttarakhand Part II**

Given the limited scope of farming, cattle rearing and forest-based entrepreneurship, the youth of Kumaun (and Garhwal) found in the British Indian Army an unparalleled opportunity to show their strength and valour, travel across the country and the world and win laurels. Together with the Ghurkhas from Nepal, Pathans from the NWFP and the Jat Sikhs of Punjab, the highlanders of the Kumaun Hills were amongst the 'prominent martial races' of British India. The headquarters of the Kumaun and Garhwal Regiment were established in Ranikhet and Lansdowne respectively, and the Garhwali also took pride in the Victoria Cross winners Darwan Singh Negi (from Chamoli) and Gabar Singh Negi (of Chamba in Tehri Garhwal) in World War 1. However, the counterfactual was equally strong. As mentioned earlier, Vir Chandra Singh Garhwali refused to open fire on an unarmed procession of Congressmen in Peshawar in 1930, and over 2500 soldiers of these regiments opted to join the Azad Hind Fauj under Subhash Bose in 1945 when the occasion arose. Captain Chandra Singh Negi rose to be a Lt Colonel in the Azad Hind Fauj, and Captain RN Awasthi and Buddhi Singh also held responsible positions.

In the aftermath of Independence, the entire region, as well as the princely Tehri Garhwal, was brought under the administration of Uttar Pradesh (the new name of the erstwhile United Provinces). It may be mentioned that as Tehri was under the Punjab States Agency from 1936, and then under Punjab States (in the Ministry of

states), the possibility of a larger Himalayan state – Ladhak, Lahaul Spiti, Garhwal and Kumaun was under active consideration for a brief period. Be that as it may, by 1950, the first map of the Republic of India had both Kumaun and Garhwal under the state of UP.

In the post-independence period, the first political party to take up the issue of a separate Uttarakhand was the Communist Party of India. The undivided CPI took it up in 1952 when its General Secretary P.C. Joshi sent a memorandum in this regard to the Government of India. This was forwarded to the States Reorganization Commission which did not accede to in demand even though K M Pannikar's note of dissent mentioned that the sheer size of UP made it administratively unmanageable. The ex-Maharaja of Tehri, Manbendra Shah revived the issue of a separate State in 1957, and later in 1966 he sent a memorandum in this regard after the creation of Himachal as a UT. Perhaps the prominent position held by leaders from Uttarakhand in the national polity: GB Pant, HN Bahuguna, ND Tiwari and KC pant in the first three decades of Independence never let the feeling of regionalism come to the fore. In many ways the rise of the 'Uttarakhand sentiment' coincided with the marginalization of these leaders both in the politics of UP and the Centre.

Earlier the National Forest Policy of 1952 had laid down that properly managed forests must not only supply raw materials for industry, export and defense, but also secure a balanced eco-system, while ensuring local people's demands for firewood, grazing land and minor forest produce for livelihoods and entrepreneurship. However the forest department was set in its old ways, and discouraged all forms of small-scale commodity extraction. More importantly, under the extant rules it

was difficult for small-scale local entrepreneurs to compete at the forest department auctions with merchants and traders from outside the region who had the capacity to mobilize finance through their links in the capital and credit markets. They also brought with them skilled and semi-skilled laborers, mostly Nepalis, who were more 'biddable' and willing to work for lower wages.

Another factor that led to the 'economic marginality' of the region was the closure of the Indo-Tibetan border in the late fifties when relations with China began to sour. The immediate impact of this was again borne by the communities which were dependent on trade for their income and livelihood and in the absence of any economic alternative; the situation became even worse. The Five Year Plans did not have anything specific for agriculture and livelihoods of the hill people, and the forest department was not forthcoming in supporting the local over the established contractors.

By the seventies, these practices of commercial exploitation, as well as the severe restrictions faced by the villagers, resulted in open discontent. In central and eastern Garhwal and in Kumaun, Gandhian workers and political activists from the Communist Party (CPI) succeeded in mobilizing local villagers (of all status groups, men and women) to save the surrounding forests from large-scale commercial felling. The tree-saving activities- well-known as the *Chipko* movement - had a clearly economic and political target: to stop exploitation by "outsiders" and to grant local people the autonomy to manage and use the forests and forest produce, and to generate local employment. This was best exemplified by the Dasholi Gram Swaraj Sangh (DGSS), a small agro industrial cooperative with strong Gandhian overtones based in Gopeshwar. Under the leadership of Chandi Prasad Bhatt, it

ran a small turpentine unit, manufactured agricultural implements and organized demonstrations against liquor sales, untouchability and forest contractor system . In 1973, it clashed with the Forest department over the provision of hundreds of trees to Symonds, a sporting company after they had been refused just a few trees from the same forest. The intervened by literally hugging the trees, and with women like Gaura Devi in the front, they were able to save the trees from the axe. The movement spread to other areas and by moving beyond their immediate local needs to a wider spatial and temporal perceptive, *Chipko* became a meaningful social movement with regional implications. Although *Chipko* did not start out as a movement for statehood, it did create a grassroots movement with a high degree of political consciousness.

( to be continued )