

## Popular Protests Against Kingship and British Raj in Western Himalayas: A Study of Erstwhile Punjab Hill States of Suket and Mandi (Himachal Pradesh)

**Dr. Sandeep Singh Raghav**

Asst. Prof. (History)

Vallabh Govt. College Mandi (H.P.)

Email: raghavsandeep0@gmail.com

### Abstract

*Attempts by common masses to influence or comment upon the issues decided by the State authorities are generally known as popular protests. Protests can be defined as actions of cooperation in which many people participate by attending and sharing the potential costs and risks. Protests can take many forms, from individual statements to mass demonstration, but are chiefly of two forms, peaceful or non-violent form, and violence. From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century upto 1947 when India attained independence, both the forms were used. Similar to the nation, these two methods were also used in the studied region i.e., the princely states of Suket and Mandi. In these hilly states, high resentment against kingship and British rule was observed. The main reasons behind the protests were forced labour, heavy taxation, mal-administration, exploitation, etc. The people of both the states used both methods of protests. Inspirations from Ghadarites of Indian Independence struggle were also there, and they performed violent activities in the states. Protests like Praja Mandal Movement were inspired from the Gandhian non-cooperation movement. For this research work, different Gazetteers, Government publications and books on the histories of both the states have been substantially used. The aim of the article here is to research how the life of the people of both the states was affected by the decisions taken by the State authorities and their reactions towards them. The paper also discusses how the efforts of the Praja Mandal Movements forced the rulers of both the states to merge the states into the Indian union.*

### **Keywords**

*Begar* –unfree labour (forced labour)

*Bagari* – common mass belonging to every caste of society who gave services to the ruler and Britishers without any payment

*Ghadar* – revolt or rebellion

*Ghadarites* – revolutionaries who took part in *Ghadar*

*Lokgatha* – Folk ballad

*Saraji* – popular folk ballad and a highly mountainous valley of Mandi district

*Wazir* – high-ranking political advisor or minister

### **Introduction**

A protest is a public display of objection, opposition, disagreement or dissent towards a concept or action, usually political in nature. Protests can be viewed as actions of cooperation in which many people participate by attending and sharing the potential costs and risks. Protests can take many forms, from individual statements to mass demonstrations. Protesters may organize a protest to make their opinions known publicly in an attempt to

influence public opinion or a government policy, or they may engage in direct action to enact desired changes themselves. Protests that are part of a systematic and peaceful nonviolent effort to achieve a specific goal, and incorporate the use of pressure as well as persuasion, go beyond the call of duty.

Governmental regulations, economic conditions, religious orthodoxy, societal structures, etc. can all impose restrictions on different kinds of self-expression and dissent. The use of police is one state response to protests. When such restrictions occur, protests may take the shape of open civil disobedience, more subtle forms of resistance against the restrictions, or they may affect other areas such as culture and emigration.

There are normally two categories of protests when it comes to protest styles. Nonviolent demonstrations in which an individual or group works together to bring about change without using violence. Violence, destruction, or intimidation are used as tools of change in violent protests, often known as riots. The beginning of a violent protest can be peaceful, or it can be triggered by frustration. Some methods of protests are sit-in protests, marches and rallies, posters and banners, hunger strike, flag burning, riots, looting and vandalism, and bombing protests.

Similar forms of protest were seen in the Indian struggle for independence also known as the Indian independence movement. The ultimate goal of the Indian independence movement was to put an end to the British rule in India, also known as the British Raj. It existed from 1857 to 1947.

Bengal saw the first nationalistic revolutionary movement for Indian independence. Later, it spread to the newly formed Indian National Congress with prominent moderate leaders seeking the right to appear for Indian Civil Service examinations in British India, as well as more economic rights for natives. The first half of the 20th century saw a more radical approach towards self-rule by the Lal Bal Pal triumvirate, Aurobindo Ghosh and V. O. Chidambaram Pillai.

Mahatma Gandhi served as the movement's head throughout the 1920s independence struggle, and Congress adopted Gandhi's nonviolent and non-cooperation stance. Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Maulana Azad, and others were prominent Gandhian adherents.

Few leaders used a more violent approach like Bhagat Singh, Ashfaqulla Khan, Chandrashekhara Azad, Subhash Chandra Bose, to name a few. After the Rowlatt Act, which enabled indefinite detention, this gained particularly widespread support. India-wide demonstrations were prompted by the Act, but they were most severely put down in the Punjab province during the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy. The movement developed a strong socialist emphasis after the 1930s. The Indian Independence Act of 1947, which terminated Crown suzerainty and divided the British Raj into the Dominion of India and the Dominion of Pakistan, marked its conclusion.

The princely states of western Himalayas also saw similar forms of protests against the kingship and the British Raj. In Suket and Mandi, popular leaders like Mian Rattan Singh, Swami Krishnanand, Padam Dev, Dr. Y.S. Parmar, Krishna Chand, Sadhu Ram, Tej Singh Nidharak, etc. chose the non-violent Gandhian methods and launched *Satyagrah* against the British rule in the states. On the contrary, both the states saw leaders like Rani Khairgarhi, Bhai Hirda Ram, Jawahar Naryal, who adopted more violent approach. Finally, due to the combined efforts of both the methods, both the states merged into the Indian Union in 1948.

### **Popular Protests against Kingship and British Raj in Suket and Mandi State**

The present district of Mandi was formed after the merging of two princely states, Mandi and Suket, on 15<sup>th</sup> April, 1948 when Himachal Pradesh came into existence. Ever since its formation, the district boundaries have not changed. According to the *Gazetteer of Suket state*, the chiefs of Suket and Mandi are from a common ancestor of the Chanderbansi line of

Rajputs of Bengal. The Suket is said to have been founded by Bir Sen in 765 A.D. and the separation of Mandi took place in the year 1200 A.D. Up to that time, it was a single state of Suket.

Both the states saw a number of protests caused by the autocrat behaviour of the ruler and his officers. Some of these have been discussed below.

### **1. Protest against forced labour and heavy taxation**

The main reasons of protests in Suket and Mandi were forced labour and heavy taxation imposed by the State authorities on common folk, especially peasantry section. In the pre-colonial and colonial time, forced labour equally flourished in both the princely states of Suket and Mandi. All subjects had to provide labour to the state for fixed periods during the year. It was unpaid because there was no choice about wanting to give labour or not. People who served such kind of services in the States were called *bagari* and *bethus*. Since agriculture was backward and most areas were not monetised, only a small part of the surplus could be appropriated through cash or kind. It was for this reason that direct labour services were the predominant form of surplus appropriation by the Hill States. The obligation of such kind of labour was part and parcel of the revenue system. Originally it was a personal obligation, but later was definitely associated with the possession of land. It represented the ruler's claim to personal services and was of three types of forced labour. According to *Gazetteer of the Mandi State*, such labour represented the ruler's claim to personal services and was of three kinds.

The first was *Phutkarbegar*, consisting of trifling services rendered to the State such as the carriage of *dak*.

The second was *Phantbegar*, consisting of services rendered to the State, such as the mending of village roads, which did not ordinarily occupy more than ten days. In this may be included what is popularly called *badijadibegar*, services given on special occasions of rejoicing or mourning in the ruling family, and on the tours of high Government officials.

The third was *Pala begar*, which involved service in some department for a fixed period varying in different parts of the State from one to three months.

The last was by far the most important and burdensome form of labour. For many years it had been regarded as a burden attaching to the possession of land, and in theory its incidence varied with the area held. Up to recent times certain classes, however, were exempt from giving *palabegar*. These were the superior clans of Rajputs, non-agricultural Brahmans, Khattris and shopkeepers. The Rajputs were expected to give to military service instead, but, in return for this, they held assignments of land revenue known as *rozgars*; Brahmans were expected to assist at State festivals, to work in the Raja's kitchen on special occasions and always to pray for the long life and prosperity of their Chief; Khattris and other traders had to help with the distribution of supplies and preparation of accounts on occasions of State entertainment. But none of these obligations can be classed as *palabegar* and were rather of the nature of *phantbegar*.

State servants and their families were also exempt, this group containing a large number of village officers who escaped the burden by the performance of nominal services. Individuals were exempted either by favour or on payment of *nazarana*. In addition, *malguzars* were sometimes allowed to commute the obligation into an annual cash payment known as *bethangna* and near about 1904 during the reign of Raja Bhiwani Sen (A.D. 1903-1912) this principle was extended to the case of non-agriculturists who were themselves unable to give manual labour. Their old holdings, which had always been free from *begar*, were not assessed to *bethangna*; but all new acquisitions were made liable to the tax.

Similar to the Mandi State, Suket State also had three kinds of forced labour which is given in *Gazetteer of the Suket State*, which were as follows:

The first was *Phutkarbegar*. It consists of trifling services rendered to the Durbar, such as carriage of *dak*, etc.

The second was *Phant* or *Jhamretbegar*. This includes the mending of village roads in which *bagaris* are ordinarily employed for 10 days. It also includes *BadiJadibegar*- services given on special occasions and on the tours of high British Government officials.

The third was *Palabegar*. It involved services in some department of the State for a fixed period, varying in different parts of the State from 2 to 4 months in a year. In lieu of their services the *bagaris* were paid *baro* which consisted of 2 seers *kham* of *baheohawai* (rice), 1 *paoKham* of dal and 4 *tokas* of Guma salt. This was by far the most burdensome form of *begar*. All persons who cultivated their own land or belonged to the agriculturist classes were liable to *palabegar*. Some individuals were exempted on payment of *nazrana* and *malguzars* were sometimes allowed to have this obligation of *begar* commuted into an annual cash payment known as *bathangna*. This principle of levying *bathangna* generally extended to the case of non-agriculturists who were themselves unable to give manual labour.

There prevails a popular folk ballad, *Saraji*, in the Mandi region that reveals forced labour that existed in the state. According to the *gatha*, the popular Sidh Sar tank in front of Damdama Palace of Mandi town was built by the people of Saraj, who were brought to Mandi as prisoners and subjected to forced labour by Raja Sidh Sen (A.D. 1684-1725). On this, Lepel Henery Griffin commented that, 'Sidh Sen built the great tank before the palace, and a lamp is kept burning to his memory on a pedestal in the midst of what should be water, but the tank has fallen out of repair and has been dry for many years.' Griffin was obviously unaware about the making of the tank by the people of Saraj. The Sidh Sar tank has its own historical importance because according to tradition this tank was constructed by Sidh Sen, and he murdered and buried Raja of Bhangal, Prithi Pal (A.D. 1710-1720) in this tank in 1720.

In the third decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some hill states including Mandi and Suket came under the Sikh rule by Maharaja Ranjit Singh but after his death, the British fought two Sikh wars and finally on 9<sup>th</sup> March 1846, Britishers abolished the Sikhs and all the hill states, including Mandi and Suket came under the British Rule, and they named them Punjab hill states. According to *The Regulations of Government of Fort William* compiled by Richard Clarke in 1854, whenever the British officials toured the hills, it was regarded as the duty of the local people to arrange *bagari* for their luggage. It was compulsory and the status and the condition of the individual concerned were not kept in view. Not only for the officials but also for their vast entourage of servants and the British tourists, *bagari* had to be arranged without payment and the people were penalized if they failed to do so. According to *bagari* the hill people had to work for the British officials on tour without payment. For public works too, bonded labour was enforced during British times. The Britishers' attitude towards the forced labour, seriously disrupted the agricultural work of the hill peasantry in their fields. Along with forced labour, the rulers of both states imposed heavy taxes on the subjects and seized their belongings upon their failure to pay taxes.

The people of both the states had a lot of resentment against the social maladies such as the system of forced labour, oppressive administration, heavy taxes, unfair land taxes, etc. All these factors became the major cause of the people's protests against the rulers in both the states.

The resistance to State revenue system and forced labour was first recorded in Suket State under the rule of Raja Ugar Sen (A.D. 1838-1876) in the mid of 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the *Gazeteer of Suket State*, Raja Ugar Sen appointed Dhungal his Wazir in the place of Narotam. The change of officers does not seem to have been an improvement for Dhungal's administration was oppressive. He realized the fines called *dand* from respectable people, a custom which seems to have originated at the time of Ugar Sen's accession. The people bore



with his tyranny for a time, but when he was on tour in the hills, they seized him and kept him a prisoner for twelve days in Garh Chawasi, releasing him only on receipt of the Raja's order. Soon after, Ugar Sen himself went on tour in the hills, and the complaints against Dhungal Wazir were such that he was imprisoned for nine months, and then fined Rs. 20,000. Second protest was also held in Suket State, when Rudra Sen (A.D. 1876-1878) was the ruler of Suket State in 1878. As time went on Rudra Sen's rule seems to have become more and more oppressive, the land revenue was increased and forced labour was strictly imposed on the subject. The people of the State protested against Raja and his officers.

Another major peasant protest against the forced labour was in the Mandi State in 1909, during the reign of Bhiwani Sen, where Sobha Ram, an ex-sepoy, decided to make a grand demonstration, and under his leadership about 20,000 agitators collected at Mandi. Over 20,000 peasants are reported to have converged on the palace to seek justice from their king. Sobha Ram who came back from the British Indian army found the political, social system "oppressive and unjust". He formed an organisation to agitate against this "oppressive and unjust" regime and against the misrule of the *Wazir* Padha Jiva Nand the highest official of the State. Initially the opposition took the form of petitioning the Raja and marching up to Mandi Town for an audience with him. Rebuffed the first few times, they reorganised themselves and came in a large group, 20,000 proprietary peasants, tenants, and others. The Raja and his officers ran away, and the state fell into the hands of these rebels who started organising a "people's government".

The Raja appealed to the Commissioner at Jullandhar who marched towards Mandi with two companies of the 32nd Pioneers. The rebels were not prepared for armed combat of this magnitude, even though the local tradition has it that the rebels had been given military training by Sobha Ram the ex-sepoy. The British Indian army had little difficulty taking control of the town after putting down whatever sporadic resistance they met. Sobha Ram, his father and twenty-four others, mostly *Kanets* and some *Kolis*, were tried and jailed — Sobha Ram to Kalapani, the others to Multan. All that the British did after the 'pacification' in response to popular demand was to remove the *Wazir*. No changes were brought in the forced labour system or in the assessment of land revenue, which were the basic demands of the peasants. But for a satisfactory solution of the question of forced labour an officer of the Indian Civil Service, Mr. C. C. Garbett, was lent to the Durbar as Settlement Officer. Another important labourprotest in Suket State took place in the reign of Raja Lakshman Sen (A.D. 1919-1948).

The last major upsurge against labour and revenue demands and against oppressiveofficials in the pattern of the traditional protest was in the State of Suket in 1924. It is stated in *GazetteerofSuketState* that in 1924 Raja Lakshman Sen imposed the heavy land revenue and forced labour and called it *Lakshmandand*. As a result, misrule and mal-administration continued in Suket. The continued high level of taxes and heavy burden of forced labour made the life of people of Suket very difficult. As a result of all this oppression, a revolt finally broke out under the leadership of Mian Rattan Singh in 1924.

During October 1924, Mian Rattan Singh made efforts to spread awareness among the folk regarding their rights and the ruler's atrocities. He went from place to place, gathering individuals such as Tita, Luharu, Thullu, Krishna and Sidhu to help the cause. They toured regions of the state like Balh, Karsog, Pangna, Jaidevi, Dehar, etc. to seek participation of people in the protest.

Mian Rattan Singh and his supporters held a meeting at Chandpur on 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1924. Only 14 of them were present, however, Rattan Singh's spirited speech made them so agitated that they started marching towards the capital of the State, Chatrokhari, chanting slogans like 'Inqalab Zindabad'. By the time they reached Bhojpur market, they had grown to 200 in number, owing to the participation of the people as they marched. As the protest

reached the court building, the rebels gathered around the court, the police station, and the State treasury buildings, and captured the Sub-Judge Ahmad Sher Khan and brutally beat him. They also seized Inspector Hira Singh, Superintendent Hardwari Lal and other corrupt officials and thrashed them.

Ahmad Sher Khan and Hardwari Lal were taken as captives towards Bhojpur. The protest had taken the form of an insurrection and the news travelled through the entire State. The tyrannical and corrupt officials started running away to Mandi and Bilaspur states, while Raja Lakshman Sen increased the security of his palace.

The next day of the protest saw a bigger group of protestors, who captured and brutalized many other corrupt officers of the State, including the *wazir*, the deceitful Govardhan Kayath and Fithu Munshi. The protest went on in a similar manner for many days. Meanwhile, Raja Lakshman Sen had sought military help from the British Government.

The protestors faced the British Army from Punjab on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1924. The British Officer D. S. Mukanji had brought the Gurkha and Peshawari Army to Bhojpur to curb the protest. Upon failure to suppress the angry crowd, he sent a telegram to Dharamshala to the political agent Colonel Minchin demanding more manpower. Colonel Minchin arrived himself on the third day, along with an army of British and Gurkha soldiers, carrying high amounts of rifles and ammunition. The British surrounded the protestors and Colonel Minchin warned them to stop the protest. Mian Rattan Singh did not want bloodshed of his people at the hands of the British and asked them to surrender peacefully. The British arrested 42 revolutionaries including Rattan Singh, Luharu, Krishna, Sidhu Ram, Arjun, Kapuru, Thullu, Tita, etc. and sent them to the Suket prison. They were charged for treason and on 6<sup>th</sup> April, 1925, all of them were sentenced to imprisonments of periods varying between 2 and 6 years, along with fines.

This rebellion, more than anything else, shows the working out of the twin processes whereby the Hill States, buffeted by the British, became increasingly insensitive to the demands of their subjects and were able to get away with it. On the other hand, the people were getting more conscious of their rights and were redefining the bounds of legitimacy of state action. In other words, this was part of the process by which the peasantry was on its way to transforming itself from subjects to citizens.

This process should not be viewed in isolation and must be contextualised in the general situation of the country as a whole. The balance of forces between the Indian people and the colonial state along with its collaborators was changing in favour of the former. Thus, it was becoming increasingly difficult to ride roughshod over the demands of the people by the end of the third decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **2. Ghadar Movement**

The hill states in India, including Mandi also participated in the freedom struggle (1914-47) against the British colonial rule. The Mandi conspiracy was carried out in between the time period of 1914 to 1915 powered by the Ghadar party. Number of meetings were organised in Mandi and Suket State in December 1914 and January 1915, and it was decided to assassinate the Superintendent and the *wazir* of Mandi and Suket, to loot the treasury. However, conspirators were caught and imprisoned.

With the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bhiwani Sen became the new ruler of Mandi state, the son of Raja Bijai Sen (A.D. 1851-1902), in 1903. He was born in 1883. As heir-presumptive he was carefully brought up, and in 1898 sent to the Aitchison Chiefs' College for his education. Mr. E. M. Atkinson, the well-known Tennis player, was appointed tutor, and Pandit Baini Madho, the son of Vaid Vidya Sagar, accompanied Bhiwani Sen as religious instructor and Sanskrit teacher. At the Chiefs' College he made good progress. When the news of the death of his father reached him at Lahore, he immediately left for Mandi but as there were no motor cars running on the Mandi Road in those days, he reached home on the

third day. He expected to receive Raj Tilak after the funeral rites of his father, but to his astonishment he learnt that Rani Datarpur was expecting a child, and the succession depended upon the issue. He had, therefore, to possess his soul in patience, but Padhai Jai Dev, the state astronomer, predicted that the Rani would give birth to a daughter, and that the latter would die after a few days. Thus, reassured Bhiwani Sen returned to the Chiefs' College. In due course the prophecy of the Padha was fulfilled, the Rani gave birth to a daughter, and there were no further obstacles in his way. He was formally installed, as Raja Bhiwani Sen, by Sir Charles Rivaz, Lieutenant Governor, who specially came to Mandi to perform the ceremony in November 1903. The Installation Durbar was held in the open space in front of the Naya Mahal, but the Raj Tilak ceremony was, of course, performed in the Madho Rao Temple in the Damdamah.

About the matrimonial relations of Raja, it is stated in History of The Mandi State, that the first marriage of Raja Bhiwani Sen had taken place during the lifetime of Raja Bijai Sen. He was married to two daughters of Mian Durga Singh of Suket. One of the brides died soon afterwards. The second marriage of the Raja was celebrated in 1907, unfortunately there was no male issues. In total, he had three Ranis, but none of the books on the history of Mandi state whom he had married in 1907. But according to Krishan Kumar Nootan, who wrote a book named *Itihas Sakshi Hai*, mentioned that his third queen was Lalita Devi, popularly known as Rani Khairgarhi. He supports this argument on the basis of interviews conducted with people, who were very close to Rani Khairgarhi, like Bhai Hirdaram, Swami Krishnanand, Rajguru, Upadhyay Jaydev and Raja Joginder Sen (A.D. 1913-1948) of Mandi. This queen had a major impact on the history of Mandi and was associated with Ghadarites and Mandi Conspiracy Case 1915.

Raja Bhiwani Sen was the most handsome among the Rajas of the hill states. He was not happy with his marriages done by his father, Raja Bijai Sen, in his childhood. So he married the princess of Khairgarh State of Uttar Pradesh. Her name was Lalita Kumari. This marriage took place in 1907, the age of Raja Bhiwani Sen was 24 years and Rani Khairgarhi was 16 years old.

Many hill states like Kullu and Kangra were directly under British Rule. Mandi state was also in the British influence since 1846. Although the Raja was the ruler, but the actual rulers were British agents. Similarly, Mandi state was being administered by Corvett and Gordon Walker. They used to keep Raja Bhiwani Sen drunk. But Rani Khairgarhi was a hindrance in their path.

She was not much educated and was very young too, but she could notice the interferences of the British agents in everything. She always tried to keep the Raja away from their company. She used to participate in the state matters herself, roam around the state on a horse, hearing pleas of the subjects and passing judgements. The British agents were unhappy seeing her interferences. When even the Raja stated that the Rani will rule in his absence, the superintendent Gordon Walker became furious, but could not do anything. So, they started to slowly poison then Raja, by keeping him drunk. This led to his death in February 1912 at the age of 29.

Rani Khairgarhi understood the intentions of the British but was helpless as she had no son as an heir. Mandi state was also recommended to come under direct British rule like the states of Kullu and Kangra. Rani Khairgarhi knew Munshi Brijlal. He used to visit the Raja with Upadhyay Jaydev. She used to discuss matters with Brijlal, who was an old man with experience of law. Brijlal advised her to adopt a son and announce him as the heir as then the British couldn't interfere legally.

Following his advice, she adopted Joginder Singh, the son of Kishan Singh, who was from the royal family as well as the commander of Mandi army, so as to prevent the state from passing into the hands of the British administration. Not long after his adoption,

Joginder Singh was declared the ruler of Mandi on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1913. At this time the superintendent of the state was Gordon Walker, and the *wazir* was G. F. Streakland appointed by the British Government.

During his reign, a major revolutionary movement Ghadar took place in Mandi state and was inspired from Ghadarites abroad in America, Canada and specially from Punjab.

Ghadar party was established in San Fransiscounder the leadership of Lala Hardayal with Sohan Singh Bhakna. When the activities of Ghadarites were taking place abroad, a person named Master Hardev of Mandi state went to America in the search of a job. He came into contact of Lala Hardayal there and joined the Ghadar party. Later Hardev was known as Swami Krishnanand. After returning to Mandi, he came into the contact of Bhai Hirdaram and convinced him to launch Ghadar movement in the state. Their goal was to seek help from the royal family against the British.

The activities of the Ghadar movement gained momentum in Mandi state in 1914. The famous Mandi conspiracy of 1914-15 was the result of this movement. Meetings were held in December 1914 and in January 1915. It was decided at these meetings that the superintendent and the *wazir* of Mandi would be killed and treasury would be looted. The bridge over river Beas at Mandi would be blown up and the states of Mandi and Suket would be seized. The objective of the conspirators was to join forces with the Punjab revolutionaries. For this purpose, the *ghadarites* started a camp secretly near Jogindernagar to train the revolutionaries in shooting and started making ammunitions and explosives in the *Sanyardi* jungle near Mandi town. Rani Khairgarhi and Mian Jawahar Singh became associated with the leaders of the Ghadar movement and helped them financially. However, except for carrying out the Nagchala dacoity, the revolutionaries did not succeed in achieving any of their objectives and the entire conspiracy fizzled out. At Nagchala, five people were arrested for this conspiracy, namely, Jawahar Naryal, Mian Jawahar Singh, Badri, Sidhu Kharara and Rani Khairgarhi. The first four were found guilty and were sentenced to long term imprisonment. Rani Khairgarhi was exiled for her role in the plan. A commendable role was played by Bhai Hirdaram in the Mandi conspiracy. He contributed considerably to the activities of the Ghadar party and remained in close association with Ras Bihari Bose, Dr. Manthra Singh, Kartar Singh, Bhai Parmanand and others at Amritsar and Lahore. He was also sentenced to 14 years imprisonment in Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

It would be also important to point out that like Mandi, Suket too felt the impact of the Ghadar movement in 1914 during the reign of Raja Bhim Sen (A.D. 1908-1919). The state authorities, however, acted very aggressively and all the supporters of the Ghadar movement were arrested and finally convicted. This suppression forced the agitators to remain silent for some time. The people had, nevertheless, become politically conscious by this time.

### **3. Praja Mandal Movement**

With the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new form of protest against kingship and the British Raj was seen in the nation. This form of protest was called Praja Mandal Movement. Like the rest of the country, Praja Mandal was set up in the Mandi state too. The main motive of the Praja Mandal was to oppose the policies of the administration especially, forced labour, heavy taxation, revenue system, etc. This movement was more inclined towards opposing the State rulers rather than the British Raj itself.

The Praja Mandal was established in the Mandi State in 1936 under the leadership of Poornanand, with Ram Chandra Malhotra, Baldev Ram, Harsukh Rai, Sundar Lal and Moti Ram as its members. Later on, it was joined by Krishna Chand, Tej Singh Nidharak, Keshav Chand, Padmanand and Hem Raj. However, this Praja Mandal was suppressed by Raja Joginder Sen.

According to *Selected Works of Jawahar Lal Nehru, Vol. 10*, on 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> February 1939, at Ludhiana in All India's States People Conference, held under the chairmanship of Pt.



Jawahar Lal Nehru, a decision was taken to set up Praja Mandal in all the princely states. The conference was attended by Poornanand of Mandi State, along with other representatives from various hilly princely states. The conference led to the revival of many Praja Mandals, such as the one in Mandi, alongwith the establishment of new Praja Mandals in various other states. The leadership of the Praja Mandal in Mandi was again handed to Poornanand. This Praja Mandal heavily opposed the atrocities of Raja Joginder Sen such as forced labour, heavy taxes, etc. As per *Himachal Pradesh Mein Swatantrata Sangram Ka Sankshipt Itihas*, Poornanand was succeeded by Gauri Prasad as the leader of the Praja Mandal in Mandi in 1941, while Poornanand contributed as his advisor.

A nominated council for administering the state was established in 1943, and this was later expanded in 1944-45 by incorporating an elected majority of members. Eligibility for being elected in the council was, however, dependent upon a very high value of property ownership. As a result, the leaders of the Praja Mandal movement – Krishna Chand, Sadhu Ram and Tej Singh Nidharak were not satisfied. The leaders of the Praja Mandal were arrested in August 1947, but released after only five months. The Raja finally agreed to establish a responsible government and the leaders of the Praja Mandal were invited to form the Ministry. The invitation was accepted and the ministry that was thus formed, functioned till the formation of Himachal Pradesh in 1948.

After a few years of the Ludhiana Conference of 1939, a Praja Mandal had been set up in the Suket state too. By 1945, the activities of the Praja Mandal movement led by Mian Rattan Singh had gripped the Suket state. The movement gained considerable popularity amongst the common people, and by 1947 its leadership was ready to launch a satyagraha against the ruler. The repressive measures adopted by the Raja Lakshman Sen to suppress the revolt were unsuccessful. To take the movement further, the Suket satyagrahis met at Sunni in February 1948, under the leadership of Padam Dev and Mian Rattan Singh. The satyagrahis in Suket started the activities of a non-violent protest on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1948, and finally launched the *satyagrah* movement two days later on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1948 from Tattapani. Their primary objective was to set up a democratic province under the centre. Their route went through Karsog, Jaidevi, Pangna and Bhojpur. Within five days of the launch of the protest, about seventy-five per cent of the area of state came under their control. No resistance was offered to the satyagrahis by the police of the state. On 23<sup>rd</sup> February, Raja Lakshman Sen appealed to the Indian government to send an army to suppress the revolt. Two days later, on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1948 the Suket State administration was taken over by the Government of India. Consequently, thousands of people marched victoriously into Sundernagar town. Suket state and Mandi state were merged to form the Mandi district and on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1948, the Mandi district became one of the four districts, alongwith Chamba, Mahasu and Sirmour, of the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, it can be said that protests are a catalyst for change. Protests play a significant role in shaping the societies and influencing social change. They serve as a powerful tool for expression of discontent, raising awareness, and advocating for various causes. Protests have the power to challenge entrenched power structures, promote inclusivity, and shape the course of history.

The protests in the princely states of Suket and Mandi were driven by resentment against forced labour, heavy taxation imposed by the state authorities, and exploitation of the common people.

Forced labour was a prevalent practice in both states, where subjects were required to provide unpaid labour to the state. There were three types of forced labor: Phutkar begar, which involved trivial services like carrying mail; Phant begar, which included tasks like repairing village roads; and Pala begar, the most burdensome form, requiring service in a department

for a fixed period. Certain classes, such as Rajputs and non-agricultural Brahmins, were exempt from Pala begar. The British rule further intensified forced labor and imposed heavy taxes, leading to widespread resentment and protests against the rulers. Several notable uprisings occurred, including in Suket in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and in Mandi in 1909. These protests aimed to challenge the oppressive administration, demand fair treatment, and alleviate the burdens of forced labor and excessive taxation. The rebellion in Suket in 1924, led by Mian Rattan Singh, gained significant momentum but was eventually suppressed by the British Army. These protests highlighted the growing consciousness of people's rights and the evolving dynamics between the rulers and the peasantry.

During the freedom struggle in India from 1914 to 1947, both the hill states actively participated in the movement against British colonial rule. During Joginder Sen's reign, the revolutionary Ghadar movement gained momentum in Mandi state. Master Hardev (later known as Swami Krishnanand) from Mandi had joined the Ghadar Party in America and convinced Bhai Hirdaram to launch the Ghadar movement in the state. Mian Jawahar Singh and Rani Khairgarhi supported the movement financially. The Mandi conspiracy of 1914-15 resulted from the Ghadar movement, where the plan was to assassinate the superintendent and the *wazir* of Mandi, loot the treasury, blow up the bridge over the Beas River, and seize Mandi and Suket states. However, apart from a dacoity in Nagchala, the revolutionaries failed to achieve their objectives, and the conspiracy was suppressed. Rani Khairgarhi was exiled, while others involved were imprisoned. It's worth noting that Suket also experienced the impact of the Ghadar movement in 1914 during Bhim Sen's reign. The state authorities responded aggressively, arresting, and convicting supporters of the movement. This suppression temporarily silenced the agitators, but the people had become politically conscious by then.

The Praja Mandal Movement emerged in the early 20th century as a form of protest against kingship and British rule in India. In the Mandi state, the Praja Mandal was established in 1936 with the objective of opposing the policies of the administration, including forced labor and heavy taxation. Raja Joginder Sen suppressed this movement, but it was revived in 1939 after a conference chaired by Jawaharlal Nehru. The renewed Praja Mandal in Mandi vehemently opposed Raja Joginder Sen's oppressive actions. In the Suket state, a Praja Mandal was set up in the early 1940s. The movement gained popularity among the common people, and by 1947, its leadership was prepared to launch a Satyagraha (non-violent protest) against the ruler, Raja Lakshman Sen. The efforts of the Praja Mandals in both the states led to the establishment of responsible governments, and the merging of the states into Himachal Pradesh of the Indian union in 1948.

In the end, it is undeniable that these protests accelerated the achievement of independence in the hill states, if not brought it. Such protests held throughout the country brought the much-needed awareness among the people, and helped in eradicating kingship and the British Raj from India.

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