

From Sanad to Statehood: Graded Sovereignty, Forced Labour and the Integration of the Western Himalaya, 1815–1971

SHASHI KUMAR¹, RAKESH KUMAR², SURESH KUMAR³

¹Assistant Professor, Department of History, Government College, Nihri, District Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, Email: Shashi.12327@gmail.com, 9418659327

²Assistant Professor, Department of History, Government College Shri Naina Devi Ji, District Bilaspur, Himachal Pradesh

³Assistant Professor, Department of History, Government College Darlaghat, District Solan, Himachal Pradesh

Abstract

Between 1815 and 1971 the western Himalaya moved from a patchwork of some thirty tributary chiefships to a single Indian state. This article argues that terrain alone does not account for the region's marginality, which was an administrative product. Colonial rule worked through graded sovereignty: annexation in Kangra after 1846, sanad-based paramountcy elsewhere. Because the small states taxed labour rather than land, popular politics took shape around begar, and praja mandal movements demanded inclusion rather than autonomy. Integration then proceeded in five constitutional steps between 1948 and 1971. The case complicates arguments that treat uplands as zones of evasion.

Keywords: begar; paramountcy; praja mandal; princely states; Himachal Pradesh

Introduction

1.1 The problem

On 15 April 1948 the Government of India merged roughly thirty princely states in the western Himalaya into a single administrative unit and called it Himachal Pradesh.[The sources differ on the number. The general histories of the region give about thirty states merged in April 1948, while the schedule appended to the White Paper enumerates fewer. The larger figure is used here for the merged tract as a whole; the discrepancy is not resolved. Government of India, Ministry of States, White Paper on Indian States (New Delhi: Government of India, 1948), para. 80, 19, and Appendix XIX, 98.] The merger took a few weeks of negotiation and one afternoon of ceremony. Full statehood arrived twenty-three years later, on 25 January 1971. In between, the territory was a Chief Commissioner's Province, a Part C state with an elected assembly, a Union Territory without one, a Union Territory with a restored legislature, and finally the eighteenth state of the Indian Union. Five constitutional statuses in a little over two decades is an unusual record even by the standards of India's long reorganization of its internal map.

The usual explanation is administrative: the territory was poor, thinly populated, hard to govern and expensive to service, so Delhi hesitated. That explanation is not wrong, but it takes for granted precisely what needs accounting for. Poverty, thin population and administrative difficulty were not natural facts about the western Himalaya. They were the measurable residue of a particular way of governing the region for a century and a half, and the categories in which they were expressed, such as revenue yield, road mileage, literacy and "backwardness", were themselves colonial instruments. The question worth asking is not why integration was slow but how the region came to be the sort of place about which such a question could be asked at all.

1.2 Argument

This article makes three connected claims, the third more tentative than the other two. The first is that British rule in the western Himalaya operated through what may be called graded sovereignty: a deliberately uneven distribution of administrative penetration in which one part of the region was annexed outright and subjected to survey, settlement and forest law, while an adjoining part was left under dozens of miniature rulers who exercised internal authority at the pleasure of a paramount power that declined to legislate inside their borders. The second is that because the small hill states drew their surplus principally from labour rather than from land revenue, the political conflict that eventually dissolved them took the form of a campaign against begar, unpaid compulsory service, rather than a campaign for representation in the abstract. The third is offered as a proposition rather than a finding, because the published record supports it without settling it: that the category of hill identity which carried the statehood argument to its conclusion in 1971 was assembled during that campaign and afterwards translated into constitutional language. On the evidence available it was a claim about administration before it was a claim about culture. Section 8.4 sets out what would be needed to establish it.

The case bears on a wider question about mountain peripheries. James Scott's account of upland Southeast Asia describes highlands as spaces of deliberate evasion, where communities positioned themselves beyond the reach of grain-collecting states.[James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).] Willem van Schendel had earlier proposed that such regions become invisible because area-studies frameworks cut across them, and Sara Shneiderman has since asked how far the resulting model travels to the

Himalaya at all.[Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20 no. 6 (2002): 647–68. For a Himalayan qualification of the Zomia thesis see Sara Shneiderman, “Are the Central Himalayas in Zomia? Some scholarly and political considerations across time and space,” *Journal of Global History* 5 no. 2 (2010): 289–312.] The scope of that comparison matters. Van Schendel’s zone reached westward across the Himalaya, whereas Scott confined his own study to the massif of mainland Southeast Asia, so that carrying the model north-westward extends it rather than tests it. The western Himalayan record fits none of these descriptions comfortably. Its uplanders were not evading a state; they were subjects of about thirty of them, and their political demand in the 1930s and 1940s was for more government rather than less: for schools, courts, wages, and eventually for a legislature of their own. If the Himalayan hill states were marginal, it was not because they had escaped incorporation but because they had been incorporated on terms that reproduced their smallness.

Section 2 sets out the region, the sources and their limits. Section 3 examines the sanad settlement that followed the Anglo-Gorkha war and the doctrine of paramountcy that grew from it. Section 4 contrasts the annexed tract of Kangra after 1846 with the states left under indirect rule, and argues that this divergence structured everything that followed. Section 5 turns to begar and forest leases as the material core of hill sovereignty. Section 6 traces the praja mandal movements from the Mandi conspiracy of 1914–15 to the Suket satyagraha of 1948. Section 7 follows the five constitutional moves between 1948 and 1971 and asks what argument finally succeeded. Section 8 discusses what the integration left untouched and situates the Himachal route among other Indian upland settlements, and Section 9 concludes.

2. Region, sources and method

2.1 The territory

The territory in question lies between the Yamuna and the Ravi, drained by the Sutlej, the Beas and their tributaries, rising from the Siwaliks through the middle mountains to the trans-Himalayan valleys of Lahaul, Spiti and upper Kinnaur. Politically it was never one thing. At the beginning of the nineteenth century it contained a handful of substantial kingdoms, among them Chamba, Kangra, Mandi, Suket, Bilaspur (Kahlur), Sirmaur and Bushahr, and a much larger number of very small chiefships, particularly in the tract that colonial officials came to call the Simla Hill States. Some of these were minute. Several held a few dozen villages; Darkoti, Mangal and Beja were smaller than many single estates in the plains, and their annual revenues were counted in thousands rather than in lakhs of rupees.[Punjab States Gazetteers, Volume VIII: Simla Hill States (Lahore: Superintendent, Government Printing, Punjab, 1910); C. U. Aitchison, comp., *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads Relating to India and Neighbouring Countries*, vol. 1, *The Treaties, &c., Relating to the Punjab, the Punjab States and Delhi*, rev. ed. (Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch, 1931), 25, recording the area, population (1921 Census) and revenue of Darkoti (8 sq. mi.; 610; Rs. 2,000), Mangal (12 sq. mi.; 1,200; Rs. 1,200) and Beja (4 sq. mi.; 940; Rs. 11,000).] Their rulers nonetheless bore royal titles, maintained genealogies of considerable antiquity, and claimed descent from Rajput houses of the plains.

A note on nomenclature is needed. Colonial spellings are retained where the article discusses the colonial period, so that the town and district appear as Simla and the state as Bushahr; the modern forms Shimla and Kinnaur are used for the post-1971 period. Spellings inside the titles of quoted documents are retained as printed, so that the Bushahr sanads appear under the form Bashahr. Begar, praja mandal, sanad and satyagraha are treated as naturalized terms and are not italicized.

2.2 The documentary base

The documentary base for the region’s history is uneven and heavily mediated. The indispensable compilation remains the two-volume *History of the Panjab Hill States* assembled by J. Hutchison and J. Ph. Vogel in the 1930s, which stitched together dynastic chronicles, inscriptions, copper plates and colonial reports into a continuous narrative for each state.[J. Hutchison and J. Ph. Vogel, *History of the Panjab Hill States*, 2 vols (Lahore: Superintendent, Government Printing, Punjab, 1933).] It is an invaluable work and a treacherous one. Its backbone is the vanshavali, the dynastic genealogy, a genre whose purpose was to establish legitimacy rather than to record events, and which routinely supplied plains-Rajput origins for lineages whose actual antecedents were local. Arik Moran has shown how far such claims were themselves reshaped during the colonial encounter, as hill rulers learned which version of their past the new paramount power was prepared to recognize.[Arik Moran, *Kingship and Polity on the Himalayan Borderland: Rajput Identity during the Early Colonial Encounter* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019); Arik Moran, “From mountain trade to jungle politics: the transformation of kingship in Bashahr, 1815–1914,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 44 no. 2 (2007): 147–77.] Genealogical statements in these sources are therefore evidence of what rulers wished to be true at the moment of recording, which is a different and often more interesting thing.

Alongside the chronicles sit the colonial compilations: the Punjab States Gazetteers volumes on the Simla Hill States, Mandi, Chamba and their neighbours; the settlement reports for the annexed districts, of which G. C. Barnes’s Kangra settlement report and J. B. Lyall’s revised settlement of 1865–72 are the most substantial; and the travel accounts of Moorcroft, Trebeck and Alexander Gerard.[G. C. Barnes, *Report of the Land Revenue Settlement of the Kangra District* (Lahore, 1889); J. B. Lyall, *Report of the Land Revenue Settlement of the Kangra District, Panjab, 1865–72* (Lahore: Central Jail Press, 1874); William Moorcroft and George Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1841); Alexander Gerard, *Account of Koonawur, in the Himalaya* (London: James Madden, 1841).] These record with great precision the things the administration wished to know, such as cultivated area, tenures, tribute and routes, and pass over the things it did not. Temple records offer a partial corrective. Mahesh Sharma’s work on the Chamba material demonstrates that shrines kept their own archives of grants, disputes and pilgrimage rights, and that these documents preserve a view of legality that ran parallel to, and sometimes against, the ruler’s court.[Mahesh Sharma, *Western Himalayan Temple Records: State, Pilgrimage, Ritual and Legality in Chamba* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).]

Two bodies of official material carry much of the evidentiary weight in what follows, and neither is a narrative source. The first is Aitchison's compilation of treaties, engagements and sanads, whose Punjab volume prints the instruments by which the hill chiefs were restored after 1815 and confirmed after 1846, together with short state narratives and tables of area, population and revenue. Read as documents rather than as a reference shelf, the sanads show what the paramount power asked of each chief, including the service obligations examined in Section 5. The second is the Ministry of States' White Paper of 1948, which sets out the government's own account of paramountcy, of its lapse, and of the reasoning by which small states were judged unfit to survive. Both are partisan documents, and their value lies in that fact: they state openly an administrative logic that the gazetteers leave to be inferred.

2.3 Approach and limitations

The method is interpretive rather than archival. This article does not claim new manuscript discoveries; it reads a published corpus of settlement reports, gazetteers, chronicles and constitutional records for the categories those documents created rather than only for the facts they report. A settlement report is treated here as an instrument as well as a description: it records a practice and, in recording it, fixes it. The contribution therefore lies in the arrangement of the evidence rather than in its recovery.

Three limitations follow, and are better stated than smoothed over. First, the record is overwhelmingly official, and cultivators appear in it as objects of enumeration rather than as authors. Second, the published sources are thin on two matters central to the argument: the actual incidence of begar, for which no systematic quantitative series exists, and the internal composition of the praja mandals, on which the general histories are largely silent. Claims about both are accordingly stated as inferences. Third, the state records of Chamba, Mandi and Bilaspur, the forest working plans of the hill circles, and the files of the Superintendent of Hill States would allow several arguments made here to be tested against individual cases, and in places corrected.

3. The sanad settlement and the doctrine of paramountcy

3.1 The Anglo-Gorkha war and the restoration of the chiefs

The decisive moment for the political form of the western Himalaya was the Anglo-Gorkha war of 1814–16. Gorkha expansion westwards across the Sutlej in the first decade of the nineteenth century had subordinated or displaced most of the hill chiefs; several took refuge in the plains. The British campaign under David Ochterlony expelled the Gorkha garrisons and left the East India Company in possession of a region it had no wish to administer directly and every wish to hold cheaply.[Hutchison and Vogel, *History of the Panjab Hill States*, vol. 1; Manjit Singh Ahluwalia, *Social, Cultural and Economic History of Himachal Pradesh* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing, 1998).]

The instrument chosen was the sanad. Between 1815 and the early 1820s the restored chiefs received grants confirming them in their territories on stated conditions: tribute where it was thought extractable, military assistance, submission of external relations to the Company, and acceptance of the Company's arbitration in disputes among themselves.[On the restoration of the hill chiefs after the Gorkha War, including the conference of chiefs convened by Major-General Ochterlony at Plassia to determine each chief's territory prior to the Gorkha occupation, see the narrative for the Punjab Hill States and the terms of the Sanad conferring the Raj of Bashahr on Rajah Muhendra Singh, dated 8 February 1816 (No. XXV)—which required tribute, personal service with armed followers and begarees, submission of external relations to the British authorities, and the construction of roads—and the negotiated terms recorded in the Paper of Requests presented by the agents of Raja Maha Chand of Bilaspur and answered by Major-General Ochterlony, dated 18 February 1815, in Aitchison, *Treaties, Engagements and Sanads*, vol. 1, 14–15, 71, 316.] A Superintendent of Hill States, later a Political Agent, was stationed to supervise them. The arrangement cost almost nothing and produced a belt of dependent principalities along a strategically awkward frontier.

3.2 From layered sovereignty to graded sovereignty

The subtler effect of the sanad was on the structure of authority within the hills. Pre-colonial sovereignty in this region had been layered and contested. A raja's writ was qualified by ranas and thakurs holding tracts on terms that varied from tributary to effectively independent, by village and clan bodies with substantial control over commons and disputes, and by temple establishments whose deities held land, adjudicated quarrels and commanded followings that crossed political boundaries. Peter Sutherland's characterization of these polities as "very little kingdoms" captures the way sovereignty was distributed across human and divine claimants rather than concentrated in a single throne.[Peter Sutherland, "Very little kingdoms: the calendrical order of west Himalayan Hindu polity," in *Sharing Sovereignty: The Little Kingdom in South Asia*, ed. Georg Berkemer and Margret Frenz (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2003), 31–62.] The sanad had no vocabulary for this. It named one chief per territory, fixed his boundary, and made his authority a grant from above rather than a negotiated position among peers. Bernard Cohn's argument that colonial knowledge-making converted plural and situational practices into fixed, enumerable categories applies with unusual clarity here.[Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).]

The term needs defining, because neighbouring ones are already in use. Aihwa Ong's graduated sovereignty describes a state that governs different populations inside its territory under different regimes, generally in the service of capital; Lauren Benton's account of imperial legal geography describes empire as an affair of corridors, enclaves and anomalous jurisdictions rather than of uniform territorial control.[Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 75–96; and, for imperial space imagined as corridors and enclaves rather than as uniform territory, Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European*

Empires, 1400–1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).] What is at issue here is narrower than either. Graded sovereignty as used in this article is an administrative gradient produced inside one region by a single paramount power, which annexed one tract, declined to legislate inside the next, and afterwards read the difference between them as a fact about the people who lived there. The gradient was not a by-product of distance from the capital; it was written into the instruments of rule.

3.3 Paramountcy as an undefined residual authority

What followed was the elaboration of paramountcy as a doctrine. Charles Lewis Tupper's compilation of Indian political practice at the end of the nineteenth century codified a body of custom under which the Crown claimed an undefined residual authority over the states, undefined because definition would have limited it.[Charles Lewis Tupper, *Our Indian Protectorate: An Introduction to the Study of the Relations between the British Government and its Indian Feudatories* (London: Longmans, Green, 1893); the official position was later summarized in near-identical terms: "The paramountcy of the British Crown was not co-extensive with the rights of the Crown flowing from the Treaties. It was based on Treaties, Engagements, Sanads as supplemented by usage and sufferance." Government of India, White Paper on Indian States, para. 19, 6; cf. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's statement of 5 July 1947, describing the same doctrine as one that "has remained undefined to this day," reprinted in the White Paper at Appendix VI, 47.] The Indian States Committee that reported in 1929 was invited to clarify the relationship and conspicuously declined to do so, affirming that paramountcy must remain paramount.[Report of the Indian States Committee, 1928–1929 (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1929).] For large states such ambiguity was a grievance to be negotiated. For a chiefship of forty villages it was the whole of its external existence.[The Adoption Sanad (No. XVII) granted in near-identical terms to the chiefs of Kalsia and of the Punjab Hill States, dated 5 March 1862, illustrates the conditional and open-ended character of this residual authority: the Crown undertook that nothing would disturb the engagement "so long as your House is loyal to the Crown, and faithful to the conditions of the Treaties, Grants, or Engagements which record its obligations to the British Government." Aitchison, *Treaties, Engagements and Sanads*, vol. 1, 64.] Ian Copland and Barbara Ramusack have shown how the interwar politics of the princely order revolved around the anxieties of the larger houses; the smaller ones appear in that literature, when they appear at all, as objects of consolidation schemes.[Ian Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire, 1917–1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Barbara N. Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and their States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).]

The consequences inside the states were considerable. A ruler secure against his neighbours and against internal rivals, and answerable upwards only on matters of external conduct, had less reason than before to accommodate the intermediate claimants beneath him. Nicholas Dirks's study of a southern little kingdom argued that colonial rule hollowed out the ritual and redistributive substance of kingship while preserving its form.[Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).] In the western Himalaya the hollowing was less complete, because the deities retained their estates and their followings, but the direction was the same. The raja became simultaneously more secure and less consequential: a proprietor of revenues rather than the apex of a working political order.

4. Two administrative worlds: Kangra after 1846

4.1 The annexed tract

The second structural event was the First Anglo-Sikh War. Under the Treaty of Lahore of 1846 the Company took the Jalandhar Doab, between the Beas and the Sutlej, and the hill countries between the Beas and the Indus. Kangra, Kullu, and beyond them Lahaul and Spiti, were annexed and formed into a district of the Punjab. Chamba, Mandi, Suket, Bilaspur, Sirmaur, Bushahr and the cluster of small states around Simla remained under sanad.[Immediately after the Treaty of Lahore, the neighbouring hill states were, in contrast to Kangra, restored to their rulers by separate sanads rather than annexed: Chamba was granted to Raja Sri Singh by Sanad No. XCII, dated 6 April 1848, which itself recites the cession of the hill countries between the Beas and the Indus under the Treaty of 9 March 1846; Mandi was granted to Raja Balbir Sen by Sanad No. LXXXII of October 1846; and Suket was granted to Raja Ugar Sen by Sanad No. XCVII of October 1846, both rulers having tendered their allegiance to the British Government at Bilaspur in February 1846. See Treaty between the British Government and the State of Lahore, 1846 (No. X), arts. 3–4, and the narratives and sanads for Chamba, Mandi and Suket, in Aitchison, *Treaties, Engagements and Sanads*, vol. 1, 50–51, 141, 152, 324.] From this point the region contained two administrative worlds, and the difference between them compounded for a hundred and twenty years.

In the annexed tract the full apparatus of Punjab administration was applied. Barnes conducted a regular settlement in the early 1850s and Lyall a revised settlement between 1865 and 1872, recording rights, classifying tenures and fixing a cash demand.[Barnes, *Settlement of the Kangra District*; Lyall, *Settlement of the Kangra District, 1865–72*.] The record-of-rights that emerged was an imperfect and in places an inventive document, but it created something the states did not possess: a written, justiciable statement of who held what. Courts, forest law under statute, district boards and, after the constitutional reforms of 1919 and 1935, a provincial electorate followed in turn. By 1946 a cultivator in Kangra was a subject of British India with recorded rights in land, access to a court that could be appealed to Lahore, and a vote.

4.2 The insulated states

In the states none of this obtained: no recorded rights in land, no appeal beyond the durbar, no forest statute and no elections. Paramountcy was explicitly a relationship with the ruler, not with his subjects, and the Political Agent's standing instruction was to avoid interference in internal administration except in cases of gross misrule. The practical meaning of that instruction was that a grievance against a raja had no route upward. This is the mechanism by which backwardness was manufactured: not by neglect exactly, but by a policy of insulation that withheld from the states the very institutions whose

absence was later cited as evidence of their unfitness for self-government.[The Government of India's own White Paper made the same rhetorical move it is here being used to describe, framing the withdrawal of "the Paramount Power's previous policy of political isolation of States" as a necessary corrective to a backwardness that policy had itself helped produce. Government of India, White Paper on Indian States, para. 57, 14.]

Mahesh Sharma's account of the early nineteenth-century hill states makes the point from the other direction: incorporation into successive imperial orders was in the first instance economic, conducted through tribute, services and materials, and it preceded by decades any administrative development that might have benefited the population from which those services were drawn.[Mahesh Sharma, "The frayed margins of empire: early nineteenth century Panjab and the hill states," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 54 no. 4 (2017): 505–33.] Graded sovereignty was not an oversight. It was the cheapest available arrangement, and it was allowed to stand for a century because it cost the paramount power almost nothing to maintain. Table 1 sets the two regimes side by side.

Table 1. The two administrative worlds of the western Himalaya, c. 1900

Institution	Annexed tract (Kangra district)	States held under sanad
Record of rights in land	Regular settlement from the 1850s, revised 1865–72; written, inheritable and litigable tenures	Tenure defined by durbar custom; largely unrecorded and, in the smaller states, resumable in principle
Courts	Civil and criminal courts with appeal to the provincial judiciary	The durbar as court of last resort in most matters
Forest law	Indian Forest Act categories of reserved and protected forest	Regulation by durbar order rather than statute; forests worked under lease to the Forest Department
Representation	District boards; provincial electorates after the reforms of 1919 and 1935	None
Labour obligation	Largely commuted; paid labour on public works	Begar owed to the state and to those the state directed
Route for a grievance	Petition, court, provincial legislature	None upward; paramountcy addressed the ruler, not the subject

Source: compiled by the authors from the Punjab States Gazetteers, the Kangra settlement reports of Barnes and Lyall, and Verma, *The Emergence of Himachal Pradesh*.

4.3 Divergent tenure and its long consequences

The divergence in land tenure deserves emphasis because its consequences outlasted the regimes that produced it. In Kangra the settlement created categories, among them proprietor, occupancy tenant and tenant-at-will, that were recorded, inherited and litigable, and a body of case law grew around them.[Lyall, *Settlement of the Kangra District, 1865–72*.] In the states, tenure was described in the durbar's own vocabulary, which differed from state to state and was frequently a description of obligation rather than of right: a household held its fields in return for service and payment in kind, and the holding's security depended on the continuance of that relationship. When the merged territory came to legislate on land after 1948 it therefore faced two problems at once. In the former Punjab districts it inherited records that could be reformed; in the former states it had first to create the records against which reform could be measured. Settlement operations in parts of the erstwhile princely tracts continued into the 1950s and beyond, and the differing quality of the resulting documentation remains visible in revenue litigation. The administrative unification of 1966 was thus a great deal less complete than the map suggested.

4.4 Simla: the centre inside the margin

Simla complicates and confirms the picture. The hill station acquired from Keonthal and Patiala grew from a convalescent settlement into the summer seat of the Government of India, formally recognized as such in 1864, and after 1903 was reached by a railway from Kalka.[Punjab States Gazetteers, Volume VIII; Aniket Alam, *Becoming India: Western Himalayas under British Rule* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press India, 2008).] For six months of the year the empire was administered from a ridge in the middle of the Simla Hill States. The proximity produced almost no institutional transfer. What it produced instead was demand for porters, building labour, firewood, fodder, timber, milk and vegetables, met from the surrounding states through the mechanisms those states already possessed. Aniket Alam's study of the western Himalaya under British rule traces this pattern of intensified extraction without corresponding administrative development.[Alam, *Becoming India*.] The most governed square mile in India in July sat surrounded by territories in which the Government of India declined to govern at all.

5. Labour as revenue: begar, forests and the material basis of hill sovereignty

5.1 The forms of begar and the colonial demand for service

The economic foundation of the small hill states was not land revenue in the plains sense. Cultivated area was limited, holdings were small, yields were modest and much of the demand was traditionally taken in kind. What the ruler commanded in abundance, and what the terrain made valuable, was labour.

Begar, unpaid or nominally paid compulsory service, was owed by cultivating households to the state and, through it, to whoever the state directed. Its forms varied and its local names varied with them: bethu, beth, athwara and others describing

rotational obligations. It covered portage of officials and their baggage, construction and repair of roads and bridges, work on the ruler's fields and buildings, supply of provisions to touring parties, and carriage of timber. In a country without wheeled transport above the Siwaliks, the human back was the transport system, and control over it was the operative form of taxation.[Chetan Singh, *Natural Premises: Ecology and Peasant Life in the Western Himalaya, 1800–1950* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); for the begar obligation written directly into the founding sanads, see the Sanad conferring the Raj of Bashahr on Rajah Muhendra Singh, dated 8 February 1816 (No. XXV), and the state narratives for Balsan, Dhami, Kunihar and Mangal, in Aitchison, *Treaties, Engagements and Sanads*, vol. 1, 23–24, 71.]

Colonial demand did not create begar but transformed its scale and character. Touring officials, survey parties, forest establishments, military detachments and the seasonal traffic to Simla all drew on it. Chetan Singh's study of ecology and peasant life in the western Himalaya shows how the reorientation of the hill economy towards external markets in timber and, later, fruit altered the terms on which households met these obligations while rarely reducing them.[Singh, *Natural Premises*; Chetan Singh, "Forests, pastoralists and agrarian society in Mughal India," in *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, ed. David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 21–48.] World War I intensified matters further through recruitment, requisition and carriage.

5.2 Forest leases and the double grievance

Forests worked in the same direction. The states possessed timber the Government of India needed, particularly deodar for railway sleepers, and lacked both the capital and the expertise to work it. The solution was the lease: the Forest Department obtained rights to work state forests, floated timber down the Sutlej and the Yamuna, and paid royalties to the durbar. For the ruler this converted an asset requiring no administrative effort into cash. For villagers it converted forests in which they had exercised customary rights of grazing, lopping and collection into managed reserves administered by outsiders. The pattern is familiar from Ramachandra Guha's account of the Kumaon and Garhwal Himalaya and from Mahesh Rangarajan's work on the Central Provinces, and the underlying process of state-making through forest control has been examined by K. Sivaramakrishnan for eastern India.[Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989); Mahesh Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest: Conservation and Ecological Change in India's Central Provinces, 1860–1914* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); for the Bashahr and Chamba forest leases specifically, see Aitchison, *Treaties, Engagements and Sanads*, vol. 1, 16, 151, 325–33.] What distinguished the hill states was that villagers here faced not a colonial forest bureaucracy alone but a durbar that had sold access to it, which meant that the grievance was directed at the ruler as well as at the department.

5.3 Why the politics took the form it did

The consequence for politics was decisive. Where the state's principal claim on its subjects is their labour, the point of maximum friction is the labour demand itself. The first sustained popular politics in the western Himalaya was therefore not a demand for representation but a refusal of service, and its language was moral and customary before it became constitutional. The parallel with Kumaon is instructive: there the coolie begar system, documented at length by Shekhar Pathak, was broken by a mass refusal at Bageshwar in January 1921, when thousands of cultivators cast the registers into the Sarju river.[Shekhar Pathak, *Uttarakhand mein Coolie Begar Pratha, 1815–1949* (New Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, 1987); Guha, *The Unquiet Woods*.] Kumaon was directly administered territory, and the campaign there could appeal to a British administration answerable to a legislature. In the Simla hill states the same grievance had no such addressee, which is one reason begar survived there considerably longer. The comparison is offered as a contrast case rather than as a digression. Kumaon differed from the hill states in tenure, cropping and administrative history at once, so it cannot isolate a single variable; what it does show is that where an authority above the ruler existed the grievance found an addressee, and where it did not the obligation lasted longer.

6. Subjects into citizens: praja mandal politics, 1914–1948

6.1 Early stirrings: conspiracy, association and mediation

Organized political activity in the hill states began earlier than is often supposed and grew from several sources at once. The earliest episode of note is the Mandi conspiracy of 1914–15, in which a group including Mian Jawahar Singh and Sidhu Singh was implicated in a plan connected to the wider Ghadar movement then attempting to raise revolt across northern India. The plan was betrayed and suppressed, and the durbar's response was severe.[Ahluwalia, *Social, Cultural and Economic History of Himachal Pradesh*; V. Verma, *The Emergence of Himachal Pradesh: A Survey of Constitutional Developments* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing, 1995).] It is easy to read too much into a small and unsuccessful affair, but two features matter. It demonstrated that the hill states were not sealed off from the political currents of the plains and the diaspora, and it established the pattern by which a raja's repression of dissent was carried out with the paramount power's tacit approval.

A second source was reformist and religious. Associations for the propagation of religious instruction, temperance and social improvement were permitted where openly political bodies were not, and in state after state these provided the organizational shell within which grievances about begar and arbitrary exaction were first articulated. A third was the presence of individual reformers with unusual standing. Samuel Evans Stokes, an American who settled at Kotgarh and introduced improved apple varieties to the Simla hills, campaigned publicly against begar in the years around 1920 and used his access to officials to press the case; he converted to Hinduism, taking the name Satyanand, only later.[Asha Sharma, *An American in Khadi: The Definitive Biography of Satyanand Stokes* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1999).] Apple

cultivation itself mattered politically: it gave hill households a cash crop and therefore a degree of independence from the durbar's patronage.

6.2 The praja mandals and their social composition

The fourth and eventually decisive source was the All India States' People's Conference, founded in 1927 to coordinate agitation across princely India. Its programme of responsible government under the ruler, civil liberties and the abolition of forced labour and arbitrary levies supplied a template that local associations adopted. Through the 1930s praja mandals were formed in Sirmaur, Mandi, Chamba, Bilaspur, Bushahr and the Simla states, generally led by schoolteachers, small traders, lawyers trained in the plains and, in some cases, dissident members of the ruling lineages.

The social composition of this leadership explains both the movement's reach and its limits. Those who organized the praja mandals were rarely cultivators. They were schoolmasters, petty traders, clerks in state service, men who had studied at Lahore or Amritsar and returned, and a scattering of younger members of thakur and mian families with grievances against their own rulers. They were drawn overwhelmingly from the upper castes. Their command of written petitions, legal vocabulary and press contacts gave the movement a voice audible outside the hills; it also meant that the demands took a form recognizable to the paramount power and to the Congress, and that the specific disabilities of the low-caste artisan and labouring groups on whom the burden of begar fell most heavily entered the programme as an item rather than as its centre. The general histories of the period are largely silent on this point, and the question of how far the anti-begar campaign was led by those who actually performed begar remains, in the published record, open.

6.3 Dharni 1939 and Pajhota 1942

The confrontation that gave the movement its martyrs occurred at Dharni on 16 July 1939. Dharni was among the smallest of the Simla states. A satyagraha organized by Bhagmal Sautha and the Prem Pracharini Sabha demanded the abolition of begar and the establishment of responsible government; the durbar's police fired on the assembled crowd, and two men were killed.[Verma, *The Emergence of Himachal Pradesh*; Ahluwalia, *Social, Cultural and Economic History of Himachal Pradesh*.] The scale was tiny by the standards of contemporary agitations in Hyderabad or Rajkot, and it received little notice outside the hills. Within them it was transformative, because it converted a diffuse set of local grievances into a shared political memory with a date and a place attached.

The Pajhota agitation in Sirmaur in 1942 followed a different logic. Coinciding with the Quit India movement, it was in substance a peasant rising in a defined tract, directed against the state's demands for supplies and recruits, and it held out for some months before being suppressed.[Verma, *The Emergence of Himachal Pradesh*.] The two episodes bracket the range of the movement: Dharni was an urban-influenced, explicitly constitutional satyagraha in a minuscule state; Pajhota was a rural mobilization in a larger one, using older repertoires of collective refusal that Ranajit Guha's work on peasant insurgency would recognize.[Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).]

6.4 From state-level agitation to a regional claim, 1946–1948

By 1946 the leadership had begun to think regionally rather than state by state. The Himalayan Hill States Regional Council, constituted that year with Swami Purnanand of Mandi as its first president and Padam Dev of Bushahr as general secretary, held its opening conference at Mandi in March 1946 and argued for the amalgamation of the hill states into a single administrative unit rather than their distribution among the surrounding provinces. Y. S. Parmar, who led the pro-merger group within the council, was elected president in 1947.[Verma, *The Emergence of Himachal Pradesh*.] This is the moment at which hill ceased to be a description and became a political claim. The argument was practical: states of forty villages could not sustain modern administration. Its implication, however, was that the hill states shared something that made a common future appropriate, and that this something was not shared with the plains.[The White Paper articulates precisely this reasoning in relation to other small-state clusters: "in the case of small States which are inherently incapable as separate autonomous units, responsible Government would only prove a farce," and, of the Deccan and Gujarat States, that "where on account of smallness of its size, isolation of its situation and inadequacy of its resources, a State was unable to afford a modern system of Government, both democratization and integration were clearly and unmistakably indicated." Government of India, *White Paper on Indian States*, para. 69, 16, and para. 76, 18.]

The lapse of paramountcy in August 1947 left the hill rulers in a position of theoretical independence and practical impossibility. Most acceded and signed merger agreements within months, under the combination of persuasion and pressure that V. P. Menon described from the government's side.[V. P. Menon, *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1956); on the contemporary official description of "the void caused by the lapse of paramountcy" following the Cabinet Mission's Memorandum on States' Treaties and Paramountcy of 12 May 1946, see Government of India, *White Paper on Indian States*, para. 39, 10.] Where hesitation persisted, popular agitation ended it. The Suket satyagraha of February 1948, led by Pandit Padam Dev, brought volunteers across the state border in numbers the durbar could not police and made the raja's position untenable within days.[Verma, *The Emergence of Himachal Pradesh*; Ahluwalia, *Social, Cultural and Economic History of Himachal Pradesh*. For the official record of the consolidation, including the schedule of constituent hill states (Baghal, Balsan, Bashahr, Bhajji, Bija, Darkoti, Dharni, Jubbal, Keonthal, Kumarsain, Kunihar, Mahlog, Mangal, Sangri, Sirmur, Tharoch, Chamba, Mandi and Suket) and the area, population and revenue of the new unit, see Government of India, *White Paper on Indian States*, para. 80, 19, and Appendix XIX, 98.] The merger of thirty states was announced shortly afterwards and took effect on 15 April 1948.

It is worth being precise about what the praja mandal movement had demanded, because the answer bears on the argument of this article. It had not demanded independence, nor separation, nor the preservation of the states as autonomous units. It had demanded the abolition of forced labour, the recording of rights in land, courts that were not the durbar, schools, and a legislature. Every one of these is a demand for more state rather than less. Whatever the uplands of the western Himalaya were in the nineteenth century, by the middle of the twentieth their politics was a politics of incorporation.

7. Integration in five moves, 1948–1971

7.1 The Chief Commissioner's Province and the Bilaspur exception

The new Chief Commissioner's Province created on 15 April 1948 was not the region entire. Bilaspur, the state of Kahlur on the Sutlej,[On Bilaspur's identity as the state of Kahlur, its territory on both banks of the Sutlej, and the separate sanads of 1815 and 1847 that fixed its cis- and trans-Sutlej portions, see Aitchison, *Treaties, Engagements and Sanads*, vol. 1, 143–44.] was kept separate, principally because the Bhakra dam project lay within it and the Government of India preferred direct control over a territory about to be reshaped by a major reservoir.[Menon, *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States*; Verma, *The Emergence of Himachal Pradesh*. The contemporary official explanation is explicit: "The East Punjab Hill States included the State of Bilaspur. In view, however, of the location in this State of the contemplated Bakhra Dam, which is a project of all-India importance, it has been decided to take over the State as a separate centrally-administered area." Government of India, *White Paper on Indian States*, para. 80, 19.] Kangra, Kullu, Lahaul and Spiti remained in the Punjab, where they had been since 1846. Himachal Pradesh in 1948 was therefore an assemblage of the formerly princely portions of the western Himalaya only, precisely the tract that had been kept furthest from modern administration. The first territorial decision of the new order was taken not on grounds of language, culture or the wishes of the population, but on grounds of engineering.

7.2 Part C status, the reversal of 1956 and the territorial council years

The Constitution of 1950 placed Himachal Pradesh among the Part C states, administered by a Chief Commissioner or Lieutenant Governor with a legislature of limited competence. Elections were held in 1952 and Y. S. Parmar became Chief Minister. Bilaspur was merged into the territory on 1 July 1954, restoring one missing piece.

The second move was a reversal. The States Reorganisation Commission, reporting in 1955, worked principally on linguistic criteria and found Himachal Pradesh difficult to accommodate. The Commission's majority preference was for merger with the Punjab, and a separate identity survived in part because of a dissenting note within the Commission; what emerged from the Act of 1956 was the abolition of the Part C category, the reduction of Himachal Pradesh to a Union Territory, and the replacement of its legislative assembly with a territorial council of restricted powers.[Report of the States Reorganisation Commission (New Delhi: Government of India, 1955); Verma, *The Emergence of Himachal Pradesh*.] For the political leadership this was the central defeat of the period. A region that had spent forty years arguing its way out of princely rule found that in the constitutional grammar of the new republic it had no adequate noun. It was not a linguistic region: Western Pahari was classified as a group of dialects rather than a language with a standardized literary form, and Hindi was in any case the accepted official language. It was not a princely successor state of the kind that had survived elsewhere as a Rajpramukh's union. It was a terrain and an administrative history, and neither was a recognized ground for statehood.

The territorial council years are the least studied period in the region's modern history and among the most revealing. The council could deliberate and advise; the executive answered to the Union government through an administrator. Politicians who had won an election in 1952 found themselves, four years later, debating in a body whose resolutions were recommendations. The experience supplied the statehood campaign with an argument that was not about culture at all but about the franchise: that citizens of the territory voted for less government than citizens elsewhere. It is a measure of how the claim had shifted that the case for a hill state was now being made in the language of equal citizenship rather than of hill distinctiveness.

7.3 The restored assembly and the transfer of the Punjab hill districts, 1963–1966

The third move partially undid the second. The Government of Union Territories Act of 1963 restored legislative assemblies to certain Union Territories. It took effect in Himachal Pradesh on 1 July 1963, when the territorial council was converted into a legislative assembly; the new house first sat on 1 October 1963. The fourth, and the largest in territorial terms, came with the reorganization of the Punjab. On 1 November 1966 the hill areas of the Punjab, comprising Kangra, Kullu, Lahaul and Spiti, the hill portions of Simla district, Una from Hoshiarpur and Nalagarh from Ambala, were transferred to Himachal Pradesh.[Verma, *The Emergence of Himachal Pradesh*, 239–54.] The transfer nearly doubled the territory's population and reunited the two administrative worlds that 1846 had separated. It also brought in districts with a long experience of settled land records, forest administration and electoral politics.

7.4 Statehood, 1971

The fifth move was statehood itself. Parmar's case, set out at length in a government publication of 1968, rested on three propositions: that the territory was now large and populous enough to sustain a state; that its problems of terrain, communications and agriculture were sufficiently distinct from the plains that administration from Chandigarh or Delhi would misallocate resources; and that Union Territory status denied its people the ordinary rights of citizens elsewhere in the federation.[Y. S. Parmar, *Himachal Pradesh: Case for Statehood* (Simla: Government of Himachal Pradesh, 1968).] The State of Himachal Pradesh Act of 1970 was passed, and the state was inaugurated on 25 January 1971. Table 2 sets out the sequence.

Table 2. The constitutional status of Himachal Pradesh, 1948–1971

Date	Instrument	Status	Territorial change
15 April 1948	Merger agreements with about thirty states	Chief Commissioner's Province	Formerly princely tract only
26 January 1950	Constitution of India	Part C state with a legislative assembly	None
1 July 1954	Merger of Bilaspur	Part C state	Bilaspur added
1 November 1956	States Reorganisation Act, 1956	Union Territory; assembly replaced by a territorial council	None
1 July 1963	Government of Union Territories Act, 1963	Union Territory with a legislative assembly restored	None
1 November 1966	Punjab Reorganisation Act, 1966	Union Territory	Punjab hill districts added
25 January 1971	State of Himachal Pradesh Act, 1970	Eighteenth state of the Union	None

Source: compiled by the authors from Verma, *The Emergence of Himachal Pradesh*; Menon, *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States*; and the statutes cited.

The sequence rewards attention because of what it reveals about the criteria of Indian federalism. Language did not work for the western Himalaya. Neither did the princely-successor route, since the states involved had been too small and too numerous to survive as a unit in their own right. What finally worked was a combination of demographic sufficiency after 1966 and an argument from administrative distinctiveness, the very distinctiveness that a century of graded sovereignty had produced. The region's claim to statehood rested, in the end, on the accumulated consequences of having been governed differently.

8. What integration left untouched

8.1 The residue of the little kingdoms

The states were abolished; the layered sovereignty beneath them was not. Village deities in the western Himalaya continue to hold land, maintain treasuries, employ functionaries and issue judgements through oracles, and their jurisdictions correspond only loosely to modern administrative boundaries. Sutherland's account of these as polities in their own right, and Daniela Berti's ethnography of the relations between deities, politicians and officials in Kullu, describe a domain of authority that the constitutional changes of 1948 to 1971 passed over rather than through.[Sutherland, "Very little kingdoms"; Daniela Berti, "Kings, gods, and political leaders in Kullu (Himachal Pradesh)," in *Bards and Mediums: History, Culture and Politics in the Central Himalayan Kingdoms*, ed. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (Almora: Almora Book Depot, 2009), 107–36.] At the Kullu Dussehra the presiding deity remains, in ritual terms, the sovereign to whom other deities pay attendance. Mahesh Sharma's work on temple records shows that this is not a survival of folk custom but the continuation of a documented legal order with its own archive and procedure.[Sharma, *Western Himalayan Temple Records*; Mahesh Sharma, *The Realm of Faith: Subversion, Appropriation and Dominance in the Western Himalaya* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2001).] The argument advanced here therefore has a boundary: graded sovereignty explains the fate of the rajas, not the persistence of the deities.

8.2 Legislating the inheritance

Two legislative interventions after 1948 illustrate how the new state handled its inheritance. Land reform came early. The abolition of large estates and the conferment of proprietary rights on tenants transferred land to its cultivators on a scale that has not been measured here against the settlement records, and because holdings had been small to begin with, the reform produced a countryside of peasant proprietors with comparatively little concentration.[Verma, *The Emergence of Himachal Pradesh*.] Second, the tenancy and land reforms legislation of 1972 restricted the transfer of agricultural land to persons who were not agriculturists of the state, a restriction that has been contested and defended continuously since.[Himachal Pradesh Tenancy and Land Reforms Act, 1972, section 118.] The provision does in law what the hill states had done in practice: it treats the territory as a place with a distinct property regime requiring protection from the plains. The mechanism is modern and the reasoning is not.

8.3 The Himachal route in comparative Indian perspective

Comparison with other Indian upland peripheries sharpens the point. In the north-east, distinctiveness was constitutionalized through autonomous councils and the Sixth Schedule, producing what Sanjib Baruah has analysed as a durable but unstable form of accommodation.[Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).] That settlement followed decades in which the Indian state had competed with China for the allegiance of eastern Himalayan populations, a contest Bérénice Guyot-Récharard has reconstructed as competitive state-making. No comparable rivalry shaped the western Himalaya, where the argument about incorporation was conducted between the region and Delhi alone.[Bérénice Guyot-Récharard, *Shadow States: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910–1962* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).] In Ladakh, as Martijn van Beek argued, the

language of autonomy took a communal form because that was the idiom the state was equipped to recognize.[Martijn van Beek, “Beyond identity fetishism: ‘communal’ conflict in Ladakh and the limits of autonomy,” *Cultural Anthropology* 15 no. 4 (2000): 525–69.] Himachal Pradesh took a third route: it claimed no special constitutional status and asked instead for ordinary statehood, arguing that the general category should be extended to a place that did not obviously fit its criteria. The costs are real: the state has no institutional recognition of the deity politics and no autonomous councils. The compensating benefit is that the region’s politics has not been organized around the defence of a special status.

8.4 Limitations and directions for further research

The limitations set out in Section 2.3 each indicate a line of enquiry. A systematic reading of the state records of Chamba, Mandi and Bilaspur against the Kangra settlement papers would allow the two administrative worlds to be compared on the same evidentiary footing. The forest lease agreements between the durbars and the Forest Department, where they survive, would establish how the royalty was divided and what was conceded in village rights. Above all, a prosopography of praja mandal leadership across the states would settle the third proposition advanced here, by showing whether the hill identity that carried the statehood argument was assembled by the people who bore the obligations it protested against, or on their behalf.

9. Conclusion

The western Himalaya entered the twentieth century as some thirty principalities of widely varying size, all of them internally sovereign and none of them externally anything. It left the century as a single state of the Indian Union. The path between the two was neither smooth nor short, and this article has argued that its shape was determined by three things.

The first is graded sovereignty. Kangra and its dependencies were annexed in 1846 and the rest insulated under sanad, and the insulation withheld from the states the institutions of recorded rights, appealable courts, forest law and electorates, whose absence was afterwards read as evidence of backwardness. Marginality of this kind is manufactured, and the manufacturing is documented in the very records that describe its results.

The second is the labour basis of hill sovereignty: because the small states lived on service rather than on revenue, popular politics formed around begar, and the earliest demands were for the abolition of an obligation rather than for a share in power. The transition between the two, visible from the Dhami satyagraha of 1939 to the Suket satyagraha of 1948, is the central movement in the region’s modern political history.

The third is the constitutional improvisation of the years after independence. Himachal Pradesh fitted none of the categories through which the union organized itself, so that its claim had to be built from administrative history and terrain, and it succeeded only after the transfer of the Punjab hill districts in 1966 supplied the demographic weight the argument had lacked.

Taken together these findings suggest a caution for the study of mountain societies. Uplands are often approached through frameworks of evasion, resistance or exclusion: as populations that stayed beyond the state, or were kept beyond it, or were absorbed against their will. The western Himalayan record shows a fourth possibility, in which uplanders subjected to a dense layer of miniature states spent half a century demanding incorporation into a larger one, and got it. Whether that was a good bargain is a question the region continues to argue about, in disputes over land transfer, forest rights and the standing of village deities that are recognizably continuous with the disputes of the 1930s.

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