



PAHLE INDIA FOUNDATION  
FACILITATING POLICY CHANGE

DISCUSSION PAPER

# The Oscillating Throne of Himachal Pradesh

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# The Oscillating Throne of Himachal Pradesh

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## Introduction

Virbhadra Singh is currently serving his fifth term as the Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh (HP). The state is scheduled to go for elections in November, 2017 before the Modi bastion, Gujarat.

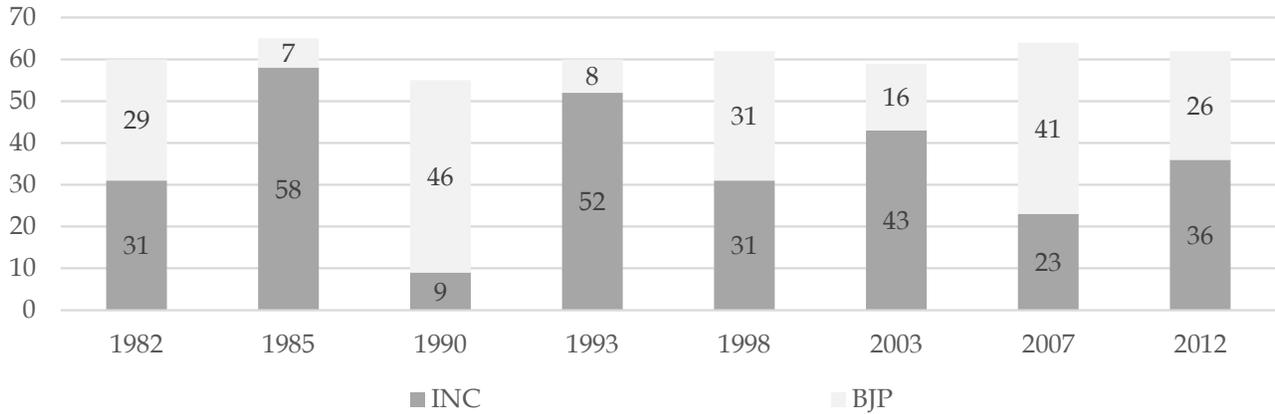
Himachal Pradesh is very often treated as a politically inconsequential state, primarily on account of low representation in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha i.e. 4 and 3 respectively. However, as BJP's ambition to achieve a "Congress mukt Bharat" gains currency, the state has gained importance despite being small. With Congress fighting a predicable battle in Gujarat, the ruling party in State would leave no stone unturned to retain power.

HP has 68 Vidhan Sabha constituencies across 12 districts, 36 of which were won by Indian National Congress (INC) and 26 by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2012 elections. The current Chief Virbhadra Singh has been embroiled with multiple controversies; but then so has Dhumal's son, Anurag Thakur who was sacked by the Supreme Court from the position of President of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI).

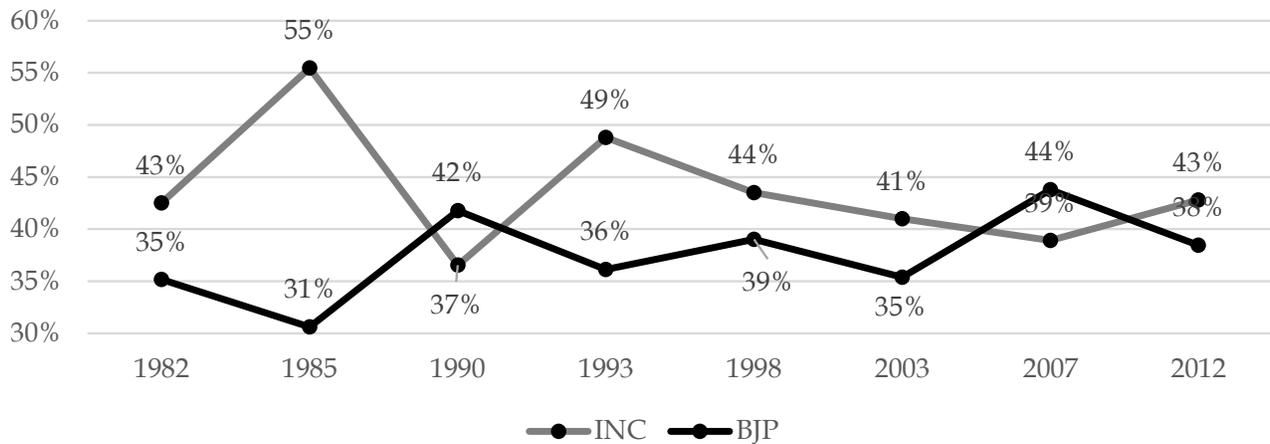
BJP already enjoys cent percent majority in 4 parliamentary seats of the state. Moreover, as PM Modi re-launched the air connectivity program of HP from a historically significant spot in Shimla, it remains to be seen whether the opposition this time around will be able to use Anurag Thakur's checkered past and local absenteeism of Modi Sarkar in past 3 years to repeat 2012.

In the last 35 years, there have been eight Vidhan Sabha elections. The INC has formed the Government five times, the BJP has formed the Government three times.

### Seat Share



### Vote Share



## Vidhan Sabha Elections, 1990

There was nationwide anti-Congress sentiment during 1989 General Elections, on account of Bofors, Punjab terrorism, LTTE, Bhopal and Shah Bano. The butterfly effect of these events had travelled to the hills as well. INC was reduced to an all-time low of 9 seats (same as 1977), plummeting from 58 in 1985. BJP formed the government in HP with 46 seats. The electorate had unequivocally expressed its dislike for INC in the state, by pushing BJP's vote share from 31% (1985) to 42% (1990) and pulling INC's from 55% (1985) to 37% (1990); (INC's vote share was 27% in 1977). BJP, which was in a pre-poll alliance with Janta Dal to make the most of the anti-incumbency, formed its own Government with complete majority. In March 1990 Shri Shanta Kumar, (Constituency: Palampur) a grassroot level politician, and a former Chief Minister of HP was sworn in for his second term. Shanta Kumar replaced the two-time Chief Minister Virbhadra Singh (1983-1985, 1985-990). Although JD won 11 seats, it was suffering from an identity crisis in the Shanta Kumar led coalition. Moreover, INC did not want a third front to gain foothold in the state. JD eventually aligned with INC in the opposition and by the time HP went into the subsequent election in 1993, the party had faded into the horizon.

Shanta Kumar's government was soon confronted by two local issues.

First, reduction of support price of apples from INR 2.75 per kg (1989) to INR 1.30 per kg (1990). This was in sharp contrast to Kumar's election campaign promise of revising the support price to INR 5 per kg. Multiple demonstrations were held by apple growers across various locations. In one such peaceful procession at Kotgarh, the police opened fire causing three casualties. The agitation was brought to a forceful halt, and Kumar's Government refused to conduct a judicial inquiry. However, the Jai Chand Malhotra Commission was set up to conduct an inquiry, which observed that the Kotgarh firing was not justified and could have been avoided.

Second, strikes held by Government employees in 1992 were dealt with little compassion. Employee leaders were awarded punishment postings, dismissed or dealt with by application of "No Work, No Pay".

Damage was done. Shanta Kumar's government had lost both trust and electoral support in the state.

On December 6, 1992, the Babri Masjid was demolished by kar sevaks of VHP, in the august presence of eminent BJP leaders including Shri LK Advani and Shri Murli Manohar Joshi. The moribund

incident proved to be in defiance of the very spirit of secularism. As a proactive measure to contain flagrant outbreaks, Narsimha Rao's Government imposed President's Rule in all four BJP ruled states including Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and HP. President rule in HP lasted for close to one year.

### **Vidhan Sabha Elections, 1993**

Discontent apple farmers, dissatisfied Government employees and a mid-term dismissal of the incumbent on account of activities inciting violence on communal lines - BJP had its back against the wall in the hilly state. In the mid-term elections, HP once again reposed its belief in the INC. Unlike Uttar Pradesh, where the political canvas had registered regional entrants, Himachal Pradesh continued to oscillate between the two national political parties.

In its campaign, BJP yet again attempted to defend its stance on the back of Hindutva, followed by playing the victim card as the party continued to believe that dismissal of government was illegal and unwarranted. The voter would not have any of it. With 71.50% voter turnout, the voters had pronounced their voices

against any religion based movement. INC regained lost ground, with 52 seats and 48.82% vote share. BJP was reduced to 8 seats.

The landslide victory came as a pleasant surprise for INC, especially after the rejection it had faced in the State just three years back. Not only had the party recovered its position in the state, it had rendered the opposition irrelevant. Being the ruling party at the Centre, INC was able to weave the narrative, making it twice as difficult for BJP to contest and win the battle of perceptions. INC devised an "anti-BJP" campaign, similar to the "anti-Congress" campaign of the BJP in 1991, and lead itself to victory. BJP's optimism, summarised in its slogan "Aaj paanch pradesh, kal saara desh (five States today, the whole country tomorrow)" had failed to make its impact.

Losing Himachal within three years was a setback for both, the leadership and the cadre. BJP workers were nowhere to be seen for the next few months. However, LK Advani, the then Party Chief, in an interview<sup>1</sup> categorically stated that BJP's debacle in HP was entirely due to the image of the government and it had nothing to do with Ayodhya.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/all-achievements-of-bjp-post-1989-have-been-purely-because-of-our-ideology-l.k.-advani/1/288660.html>

Virbhadra Singh assumed office for the third time, by securing 77.10% votes. He had won by a margin of 19,946 in the Rohru constituency (57.01% of the total valid votes). Shanta Kumar (13,478 votes) lost a close fight in Sulah to Man Chand Rana of INC (16,745 votes).

Anti-incumbency created by Shanta Kumar's weak governance had taught INC some cogent lessons. Consequently, when the party returned to power in 1993, it took up from where it left off in 1991. The party had annoyed two electoral groups in its previous tenure i.e. apple farmers and government employees.

### **Vidhan Sabha Elections, 1998**

By 1996, it was clear to the electorate of Himachal Pradesh, that INC had acknowledged and rectified its past mistakes. Come 11th Lok Sabha elections in 1996, INC bagged all 4 Parliamentary Constituencies and vote share of 54.3%. After coming to power in the State in 1998, horticulture programmes for farmers were launched. Grievance redressal of apple farmers and Government employees by way of revoking dismissal orders and salary hike were other populist measures taken by the Government to absolve itself of the scars of the past. BJP was experiencing an insipid stint in the Opposition.

While the verdict of 1996 Lok Sabha elections was in favour of INC in the state of HP, the party was unable to retain its position at the Centre. Coalitions across permutations gave India three Prime Ministers during 1996-1998. The nation was headed for another Lok Sabha election in less than 2 years.

The incumbent was scheduled to complete its full-term in November 1998. The term was marked by inclusive social and economic development. Virbhadra Singh's term was also tainted when Sukh Ram, the sitting MP from Mandi, HP and Telecom Minister was embroiled in controversy.

Chances of BJP making a dent in the state looked bleak. However, the same could not be said of BJP's position in the Centre. The sitting Chief Minister, Virbhadra Singh did not approve of HP going for elections post 1998 Lok Sabha, as there were high chances that a Vajpayee led BJP would form the Government in Centre, and swing the State polls in its favour. Clearly, Virbhadra Singh's fears were not unwarranted. INC could retain only 52% (27 of 52) seats; The Sukh Ram factor had played its part at the hustings.

*Sukh Ram, also known as the grand old "Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram of Himachal Pradesh" is the former Union Telecommunication minister. In 1996, the Central*

*Bureau of Investigation had seized cash worth INR 3.6 crore from his official residence. At that time, he was the sitting Congress MLA from Mandi. Sukh Ram was suspended from the INC in August 1996. Sukh Ram was now a rebel. He floated his political venture, Himachal Vikas Congress (HVC) in 1997. Currently, him and his son are a part of BJP. This is their second stint with the party.*

Name of the Party	#Seats in 1998	Vote Share (%) in 1998
INC	31	43.51%
BJP	29	39.02%
HVC	4	9.63%
Independent	1	4.18%

INC received support from independent candidate, Shri Romesh Dhawala; Virbhadra Singh was sworn in. In an unfortunate sequence of events, BJP MLA Varinder Kumar passed away. BJP's tally went to 28. 1998 Vidhan Sabha was turning out to be a battle like never before. Shri Ramesh Chand Choudhary withdrew support from INC and crossed over to BJP overnight. Moreover, 2 MLAs of HVC moved to BJP. Eventually, Prem Kumar Dhumal was sworn-in as the Chief Minister. He served the state from March 1998 to March 2003.

## Vidhan Sabha Elections, 2003

The BJP-HVC alliance continued even during the 13th Lok Sabha elections in 1999. The alliance emerged victorious on all 4 seats with a combined vote share of 58.2%. Shri Dhumal had managed to establish a connect with the electorate during the Kargil war, by personally visiting the bereaved families, arranging for state funerals and announcing ex-gratia. This was a welcome deviation, compared to the unattached INC leadership during any of the previous wars. The Brahmin (Sukh Ram)-Rajput (Prem Kumar Dhumal) alliance had successfully riveted the electorate, largely marginalizing INC from the canvas of both, social and political landscape.

In 1999, the BJP led NDA Government assumed position in Centre. Vajpayee's flagship program "India Shining" was in full swing. Regrettably, much love was lost within BJP when the Prime Minister pulled up incumbent Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi for the Godhra carnage in February 2002. Political pundits were already sceptical of BJP's future and the adverse impact Godhra would have on election bound states. While a united front pulled off at the Centre, cracks began to appear in the BJP-HVC coalition at the State. Sukh Ram, the HVC leader, who was forced to resign in 2002 blamed the growing factions in

the ruling coalition on Shri Dhumal. He also accused Dhumal of not giving HVC its due credit. INC refused to forge a pre-poll alliance with HVC. As the BJP-HVC coalition fell apart, cleavages began to surface within BJP too i.e. the Dhumal and Shanta Kumar camp. INC was doing no better; they were marred by in-fighting between Mr Virbhadra Singh and Ms Vidhya Stoke, a name to reckon with in the INC high command that time.

2003 Vidhan Sabha elections witnessed high energy levels and agenda-based campaigning by both INC and BJP. HVC had decided to contest these elections on its own. BJP decided to replicate the recently concluded Gujarat campaign, laced with Hindutva and obviously, the work Dhumal Government had delivered during 1998-2003. The hilly electorate was unable to connect itself with the former, considering "Asked to name the one issue that made a decisive difference to their vote, only 2% of the respondents mentioned Hindutva. Three out of four voters mentioned the issues of governance and development". INC had fenced its campaign around corruption and mismanagement of State resources. There is no doubt, that any campaign in India, which is woven firmly around corruption of the incumbent, implicitly grabs more eyeballs, occupies more mind-space and creates a dent, where it matters most. In March 2003, Raja

Virbhadra Singh was sworn in as the Chief Minister, for the third time.

The 2003 elections had reaffirmed the oscillating nature of electorate in the state. Vote share of the two largest parties INC and BJP was 35.38% and 41.00% respectively. The only organic way for any of these two parties to grow was to make inroads into the voter base of the other. The voter-turnout in 2003 elections was 74.51%, testimony to high levels of local participation.

*In the present context, it would be worthwhile for both BJP and INC to revisit the HP Vidhan Sabha election of 2003. Three valuable takeaways from this election were; one, the Hindutva card may not always be the trump call, even in a majority state; two, there is no such thing as a national wave in a Federal structure; three, incumbents are ousted if development is substantiated on the back of corruption. This election was not BJP's loss, it was INC's win.*

## **Vidhan Sabha Elections, 2007**

2007 Assembly elections witnessed the foray of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) into the hilly state. BJP was able to turn the narrative by invoking double anti-incumbency sentiment, at State and Central level. Rising prices, unemployment, and lack of political

will of UPA I to bring about a tangible change were some of the issues that BJP campaigned on. Of the six national, two state, and four registered (unrecognised) parties that contested, three national, both state, and all registered (unrecognised) parties were unable to claim even a single seat. BJP won 41 seats, INC – 23 and BSP – 1.

Since 2007 elections were announced before schedule, the Virbhadra led INC was unable to announce last minute sops. Moreover, there was little that the royal CM had delivered, in terms of farmer respite and infant mortality rate growth (Census, Sample Registration Survey). Price rise and State debt was a key issue in the election. So much so that post assuming office, Dhumal walked his way to the State secretariat as an austerity measure. The incumbent party conceded, rotating the strike yet again.

*The 2007 elections sent an important message. To INC - political machinery riddled with feudalism, nepotism, and populist initiatives was obsolete. To BJP – Expectations of the electorate were employment and industrialization.*

## **Vidhan Sabha Elections, 2012**

After UPA registered a second consecutive win at the Centre, the BJP began to overhaul its machinery.

It was a do or die situation for the saffron brigade; every election mattered. With UPA II at the Centre, and incumbent BJP at the State, both parties wanted to lay claim over the 2012 Vidhan Sabha election. On one hand, INC continued to field royal proteges, BJP was still identified as the common man's refuge. Notwithstanding the differences, BJP and INC both placed employment generation as their priority.

INC's campaign was focussed on criticizing BJP's role as a petulant Opposition at the Centre. INC blamed its inability to clear critical bills like Food Security and Land Acquisition on the vitiating intentions of BJP related to economic nationalism and foreign investments. On the other hand, BJP lashed out at INC led UPA II for high inflation and corruption.

As a close battle was contested, internal rebels once again proved costly. Although Himachal Lokhit Party (HLP) formed by a rebel BJP state President Maheshwar Singh, claimed just one seat, it garnered 2.40% votes. BJP got 38.47% and INC got 42.81% votes.

Dhumal retained his seat, but could not lead the party to victory. Local issues still mattered, and clearly, the electorate was not satisfied with the Dhumal Sarkar. INC's decision to hand over the election reigns to veteran Raja Virbhadra had paid off.

## Vidhan Sabha Elections, 2017

It is a clear game of thrones between the performance of sixth time CM, 83 year old Singh and already twice CM, 73 year old Dhumal. As 2017 State elections approach, it is only relevant that we give a hard look at the history etched on the royal throne of Himachal Pradesh. There are three important trends that

emerge conspicuously in the hilly state. One, the State electorate knows what it expects from the Government and wouldn't settle for anything less. Two, local issues matter; so irrespective of who sits at Delhi, the verdict will be based on realization of local impact. Three, as a creature of habit, the electorate is tempted to oscillate once again.





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