



# Displacement and sovereignty: Raja of Bilaspur and the Bhakra dam (1908–1947)

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## Abstract

Dams and ensuing development is a contentious topic that has occupied scholars forages, and the present article endeavors to show how the process of construction of Bhakra dam could influence the history and future of a princely state and its subjects that had been ruled by “Rajas” of Kehloor (Bilaspur) for more than 1250 years. This paper focuses on the project’s history during Colonial India from 1908 to 1947. It was the period when the seed of the idea was first sowed, and the machinations behind it would eventually decide the fate of Bilaspur’s small independent state. It involved the possibility of losing its identity and land and, notably, the loss of sovereign rights of its people. The independent principality ceased to exist in post-colonial India as it became a district in Himachal Pradesh. The relocation heaped on the masses remained silent in the annals of history, and those rendered homeless remained without a voice. The Dam’s construction depended on the consent of the Raja of Bilaspur and, finally, the government of India, which is the major player in the politics surrounding the Dam.

**Keywords** Bhakra dam · Displacement · Sovereignty · Sutlej River · Punjab Government

## 1 Introduction

Dams and development have been a debatable topic since the twentieth century. The construction of the Bhakra dam project in Bilaspur had a telling effect on the state of Himachal and how it came to be perceived in the larger context of Indian history. This study is primarily based on archival records that include correspondence between the Government of India, the Punjab Government, and the Raja of Bilaspur, as well as several written records penned by personalities close to the project and seekers who delved deep and found invaluable information that was buried in the records. Some secondary articles and books that have dealt with the large dam stories in India have also been consulted.

Shripad Dharmadhikary’s *Unravelling Bhakra: Assessing the Temple of Resurgent India* (Dharmadhikary, 2005) provides valuable information about the submerged areas under the Bhakra Nangal Project (BNP). Interestingly, it provides

agricultural production statistics before and after the construction of the Dam. The author clarifies that the decision to build Bhakra was motivated more by the desire to strengthen the negotiating position between India and Pakistan than by addressing the water needs of the dry areas empty of water. The author argues, “Bhakra has been given credit for things it never did, and it is just an ordinary project with many drawbacks”.

Rohan D’Souza’s work *Was the Large Dam a “Modern Temple”? Taking Stock of India’s Tryst with the Bhakra-Nangal* (D’Souza, 2022) has covered the debate over large dams from the 20th to the twenty-first century. The World Commission on Dams (WCD) was seen as an instrument to end the long-standing war between the pro-dam lobby and the anti-dam campaigners. As there was no consensus on the report, the debate over dams was focused on good dams in contrast to bad dams. D’Souza, in his work, has taken up two contrasting studies over the Bhakra Nangal Project (BNP) that was published in India almost at the same time: Dharmadhikary (published in 2005) and Rangachari (published in 2006). These studies attempted to compare the post-construction outcome of the BNP on the basis of a good versus bad dam framework, i.e., the model of WCD. They were instrumental in removing the debate from anti versus pro viewpoints. D’Souza’s work also covers the study

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of Amita Baviskar, which depicts the weakening of popular agitations and resistance to large dams due to sustained shifts in tactics during the twenty-first century. He also references an article by Rhodante Ahlers, Margreet Zwartveen, and Karen Bakker that points out significant differences between large dams of the twentieth century and those of the twenty-first century. The dams of the twentieth century were chiefly driven by nation-states and aimed at economic development, which met with resistance at times but were accountable, whereas the dams of the twenty-first century are assembled as financial platforms that, unlike a public good, can dodge and evade public accountability.

Rohan D'Souza's *Framing India's Hydraulic Crisis: Politics of Modern Large Dams* (D'Souza, 2008) is a valuable study that reveals how traditional water management in India was interrupted in the name of a modern irrigation system by the British and how it impacted environment, society, and politics. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) set up the momentum for dam construction throughout the world, claiming that the dams would transform the economy and lead to overall development. In India, in the early nineteenth century, the British introduced perennial canal irrigation in place of seasonal irrigation, shifting the techniques and principles of hydraulic systems. It led to a change in authorities who controlled water bodies, dramatically altering the hydraulic environment. The study and examples of big projects highlight the drawbacks of compensation, land acquisition, resettlement, and rehabilitation and how the cost–benefit ratio is manipulated for political gains. The study suggests that all this can be controlled in India, but a political resolution is needed. At the same time, the fact is that water management in India is now in the hands of institutions and organizations that possess political power, are planning interlinking river projects, and have turned it into a kind of business model.

Amita Baviskar's *Nation's Body, River's Pulse: Narratives of Anti-Dam Politics in India* (Baviskar, 2019) sheds light on the popular anti-dam movements in the last decades of the twentieth century. These movements were praised for their critique of capitalist industrialization and aimed at finding measures for development that are sustainable and also economically and socially viable. Although, in the name of development, the people were displaced throughout the twentieth century, but until 1980, no big protest movement took place. Amongst all the movements, the agitation against the Sardar Sarovar Dam was the biggest, and it was able to amass wide support within and outside the country. Questions such as socio-economic impacts, class benefit analysis, and the distributional aspect of dams were raised, and the movement came to be recognized as one that protects fragile and vulnerable cultures. The World Bank withdrew its support, but the verdict by the Supreme Court in 2000 made the Dam possible. The study observes that such strong agitations

are now vanishing because of the lack of collective action by the affected population, the distance of the affected people from the dam sites, and better monetary compensation after the government passed the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement Act of 2013 (called LARR). The work of raising voices is left to certain NGOs, while some cases are in the courts. The main concern now is who will protect the rivers and the people who live alongside them.

The book *The Dam & the Nation: Displacement and Resettlement in the Narmada Valley* (Dreze et al., 1997) deals with one of the most controversial dams (Sardar Sarovar Dam), which was to displace more than 250,000 people and was to witness one of the biggest anti-dam movements in India. The study contains ten chapters written by people who were either activists or witnesses to the anti-dam campaign for years together. The book provides a detailed insight into the issues of displacement and resettlement and other controversies and conflicts associated with the Dam. A detailed coverage of all the dam-affected three states, i.e., Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, has been done, and it has been proven in all three cases that there are some direct and indirect benefits that the dam-affected people are deprived of when they are settled in new places. The study contains suggestions for the dam building authorities, administrators, planners, and executors so that dam-affected people may not feel cheated.

Daniel Klingensmith's *One Valley and a Thousand: Dams, Nationalism and Development* (Klingensmith, 2007) attempts to show how, in the period between 1940 and 1960, there was a craze for dam building worldwide, and they began to be thought of as the symbol of nations building and empowerment. The study attempts to show how the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) began to be imagined as a model of development and how its importance throughout the world was popularized due to the internal politics of the USA. This led to the rapid construction of dams across the globe as well as in India. The Indian planners of dams and technocrats also sought help from American dam experts. However, seeking selective knowledge of the aspects of dams and ignoring the complex politics associated with it led to the selection of a different model for India. Damodar Valley Corporation's (DVP) failure resulted from the flawed understanding of the TVA. In America, TVA symbolized rebuilding American nationalism, while in India, the dams were considered the symbols of modernity, legitimacy, and power of newly independent nations and the nationalists who directed them. The executioners tried to manipulate this model for their benefit, and the poor class for which they meant had to suffer and pay the price.

The above secondary sources are significant studies to know about the histories of dams in India and worldwide in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as they provide ample



**Table 1** Land acquired for Bhakra dam and persons affected (Himachal Pradesh)

Sr. no.	District	No. of villages acquired in acres	No. of acquired private land in acres	No. of acquired government land in acres	Total No. land acquired in acres	Total No. affected families	Total number of affected population
1	Bilaspur	256	13,866	16,562	30,428	3838	36,000
2	Kangra (Now Una)	110	13,546	0	13,546	3333	
3	Mandi	5	38	362	400	35	
4	Solan	4	66	0	66	3	
	Total	375	27,516	16,924	44,440	7209	

Source: Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB) (Annexure 1)

knowledge on the various aspects of dams and development, land acquisition, displacement, compensation, resettlement and rehabilitation, anti-dam movements and their impacts, suggestions to the planners, politics over dams, and the sufferings of the dam-affected people. All the research has addressed the problem of displacement and its detrimental effects in detail. The present study deals with the history of Bhakra dam in context to the issue of displacement along with sovereign rights, which would have affected the loyalty of his subjects towards him and reduced the size of his kingdom, thereby endangering the existence and the culture of a tiny independent principality of Bilaspur. The details of land acquired for Bhakra Dam and persons displaced have been given in Table 1, and the document is attached as Annexure I in the Supplementary file.

The article details the planning and proposals for the construction of the Bhakra dam from 1908 to 1944, which was a pivotal period for the existence of the erstwhile Kehloor State and the construction of the Bhakra dam by the Punjab government. The future of the dam lay directly in the hands of the Raja of Kehloor, as it was his territory where the dam was to be built. The idea that his consent or dissent was the basis of the dam gave him much leverage in the negotiation process. Although the royalty was not opposed to the concept of a dam, they wanted to protect their subjects' rights and privileges and, at the same time, hoped to extend their sovereignty to new territories while dealing with the Punjab government. Punjab, the chief beneficiary of the Bhakra dam construction, was selfish by taking advantage of itself and not caring to compensate the Raja and his people for the loss adequately. The documents retrieved from the National Archives of India also reveal that the British crown had the final say in the construction of the Bhakra dam, despite agreements between the Punjab Government and the Raja of Bilaspur. The British government initially hesitated due to concerns about the suffering of the inhabitants of hundreds of villages to be submerged. They would only grant permission if displaced people were adequately compensated and their livelihoods secured. Another reason for the British government's reluctance was the fact that the Raja demanded land as compensation along with sovereign rights

at Hathawat (once a part of Bilaspur state, taken over by Sikhs and later by the British) or at Nili Bar colony Punjab (part of British province). The lands, if given, would have affected the crown's sovereignty.

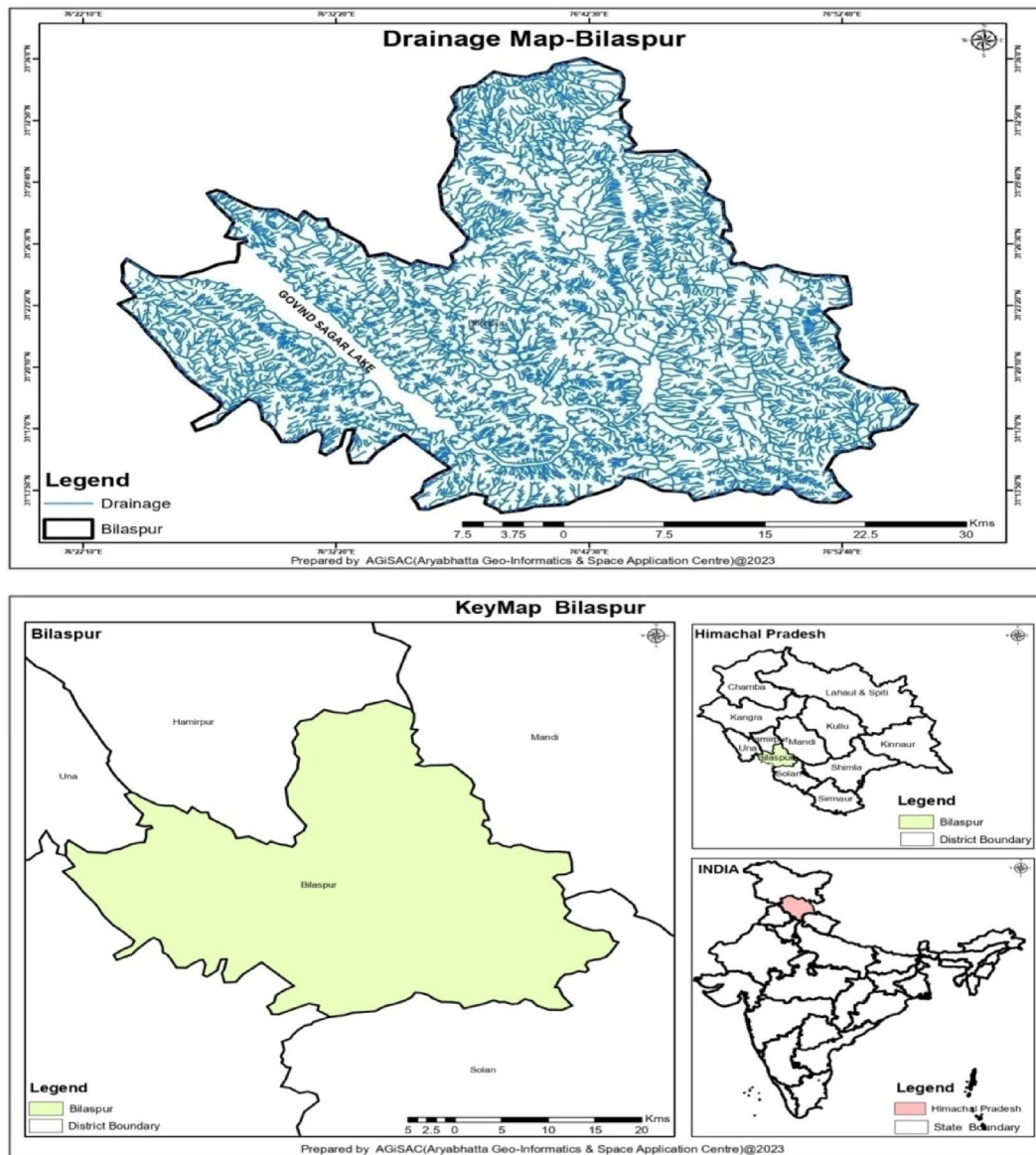
The present study brings to light the less talked-about complex negotiations over displacement and the loss of lands and villages that occurred prior to the decision to build what ultimately became one of post-independent India's most famous large dams, the Bhakra dam across the Sutlej River. The negotiation went on between the Raja of Bilaspur and the then Government of Punjab under the broader context of colonial rule. Interestingly, these negotiations over displacement and sovereign rights went on for 25 years and became the basis for the draft agreement signed between the Raja of Bilaspur and the Punjab Government. The final draft signed in the post-colonial period underwent substantial changes. Bilaspur's independent state had become a Chief Commissioner's province, and the signatory had changed from the Raja of Bilaspur to the central government. The location and study map of the area are shown in Fig. 1.

## 2 Construction ideation of the Bhakra dam (1908)

Bhakra dam derives its name from a village called Bhakra, situated in the district of Bilaspur in Himachal Pradesh, which was the first to be submerged by the reservoir. How, when, and to whom the idea of constructing such a dam came about is a question of great interest. In a memorandum to assist the Government of India about the Bhakra dam, from Chief Secretary Punjab to the Agent of Governor General Punjab States, dated December 17, 1936, there is a reference as to when the idea to construct the Dam at Bhakra was conceived.<sup>1</sup> The document states, "The first proposal to store flood water of Sutlej River appeared in a note by Sir

<sup>1</sup> National Archives of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, Puckle to The Agent Of Governor- General Punjab States*, 17th December 1936, Punjab State Agency Lahore, progs. nos. 139-G/29-vol II, p. 112.





**Fig. 1** The location and study map of the area

Louis Dane in 1908. The proposal was occasioned by the fact that the rabi supply in the river above with its junction at Beas and the rabi supply of the Jumna River has been fully utilized by the existing canals taking off from these rivers. On the other hand, the need to extend irrigation between these rivers in the interest of the insecure areas of Hissar and Rohtak has long been apparent. It remained, therefore, to find means to store and use the surplus water available in the monsoon period". So the original plan was for irrigation work, i.e., the British were trying to transform the arid regions into settled agricultural tracts. As David Gilmartin has also cited in his work that, the British focused on agricultural development in the dry, pastoral plains of the Indus in the later part of the nineteenth century, and by the middle

of the twentieth century, they had established massive canal colonies on public wastelands and one of the world's biggest irrigated basin in west Punjab (Gilmartin, 2015).

Similarly, AN Khosla, who worked on the Bhakra dam project since 1916 and later rose to Chairmen of the Central Water and Power Commission in his article "Dream Come True," also agrees with the memorandum dated 1908 (Khosla, 2013, p. 10). In his article, he further writes that in November 1909, Mr. Gordon, Chief Engineer, visited the Neila site 3 km down the Bhakra and found it more suitable than the Bhakra site. The site was investigated, and the estimated cost was 37.2 million, which was considered unremunerative; therefore, the project was dropped. These historical references indicate that the thought was to have a





site for building a storage dam at this point. This was merely the beginning of a long project that would not be completed for another 40 years. The project underwent many ups and downs between these four decades.

### 3 Bhakra Dam and the first proposal of 1919

The 1919 proposal for the construction of Bhakra Dam was the first serious step in this regard. The preparation of a detailed project for a dam at the site was accordingly taken up in 1915 and completed in 1919. A self-contained note with the letter of Chief Secretary Government of Punjab to the Agent of Punjab state mentions that, “The Bhakra dam dates as far back as the year 1916 when the Government of India, on the recommendation of Sir Michael Nethersole, the then Inspector General of Irrigation, agreed that the Bhakra dam project should be further elaborated. This brought into existence the 1919 project which, however was not actually submitted to the Government of India till August 1928 due to Sutlej Valley Project in the meantime taking precedence.”<sup>2</sup>

The Raja of Bilaspur’s Memorandum provides some specific details on the 1919 project proposal. The document is attached as Annexure II given in the Supplementary file. The Government of India, in March 1916, authorized the preparation of a project on the Sutlej River at Bhakra. The Government of Punjab entrusted the preparation of this project to Mr. Nicholson, the executive engineer, who carried out a detailed survey. Mr. Foy made the complete report and estimate of this gigantic project, which spans over five volumes. It was proposed to have 400 feet in height and a reservoir level up to 1500. Filling the reservoir would begin in August of each year, and from 1st October, water will be drawn, and the reservoir will fall to normal level by April 30.<sup>3</sup>

A.N. Khosla, being a part of the Bhakra dam project from 1916 onwards, provides firsthand knowledge in his article about the Bhakra dam project of 1919. The project report was completed and submitted to the Punjab government in 1919 regarding its height and reservoir level. The dam was supposed to have a storage capacity of 2,583,550 acre-feet, and an estimated cost of Rs 3.94 crore. He asserts that it would have been the highest dam in the world at that time if it had come into existence. The entire project and the canal system cost Rs 14.43 crore. The project was primarily irrigation and included no hydropower construction (Khosla, 2013, p. 11).

<sup>2</sup> National Archives of India, *Puckle to The Agent of Governor General Punjab States*, 18th January 1936, Bhakra Dam Project, Punjab State Agency Lahore, progs, nos. 139-G/29 vol.II, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> National Archives of India, *Memorandum by the Bilaspur State on Bhakra Dam*, 1938, Punjab State Residency, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, pp. 28–29.

### 4 Reasons behind failure of Bhakra dam proposal of 1919

It is important to note that, even though the Bhakra dam proposal was prepared as early as 1919 it could not materialize soon. A.N Khosla’s article mentioned above sheds light on the reason behind the delay of Bhakra dam project when he writes, “Contrary, however, to expectation, it was decided to take up the Sutlej Valley Project which was to irrigate large areas of Government lands and was therefore, considered more attractive, mainly because of the receipts of the sale deeds of crown wastes”. He further adds, “Political considerations had of course, to do a good deal with this decision.” To end the dispute between Sind and Punjab over the use of Indus water, the government of India approved two projects balancing both sides, ignoring the Bhakra—Sutluj Valley Project in Punjab and Sukkar Project in Sindh.

The Government of Punjab, as evident from the archival records, was not able to convince the Raja of Bilaspur that significant obstacles regarding the construction of the dam were:

#### 4.1 Issue of compensation

The practical implementation of the survey of 1916–1917, on which the proposal of 1919 was based, meant submerging 12,865 acres of land and destroying 104 villages in a small principality.<sup>4</sup> Punjab Government offered financial compensation of Rs. 25 Lakh and an annual payment for the loss of revenue and no land. The Raja of Bilaspur demanded payment in cash and in-kind recompense. The archival records, holding the letter dated July 25, 1918, confirms the reason behind the denial. It states that, “The paucity of land in his state, regretted his inability to accept cash compensation for his rights in the area required in the dam site, or an annual payment of the revenue for the said area. Another objection to the cash compensation was that the reduction of the territory would very adversely affect his position amongst his contemporary Indian chiefs. The only alternative suggested by the Raja was that Punjab Government should agree to give adjacent territory from the Hoshiarpur or Kangra district, paying as much revenue as the area proposed to be acquired.”<sup>5</sup> In the archival record there is a reference to the views of Raja Bije Chand and Colonel Robson on compensation stating that, “the form of compensation offered, whatever its monetary value, is entirely unsuitable to the people

<sup>4</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, 1936, Punjab State Agency, progs, nos.139-G/29 vol. II, p.20.

<sup>5</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, 1936, Punjab State Agency, progs, nos.139-G/29 vol. II, p. 22.



who would be dispossessed or to the state which would lose them.”<sup>6</sup>

## 4.2 Issue of sovereignty

Raja intended the Bilaspur state to have direct jurisdiction over his people wherever they may be relocated, where he was to get recompense in kind or the shape of land. The Raja lost interest in the project when sovereignty rights were denied. The detailed note on the issue of compensation, which included the extension of sovereignty rights by the Raja in the Archival records, states that, “it was on this vital question that the negotiation of 1919 fell through.”<sup>7</sup> Regarding extending sovereignty rights and the decrease in the territory the Punjab Government’s reply to the Raja was, “that there was no intention to annex any area of the Bilaspur state to British India. The proposal was that the Durbar should agree to cede exclusive jurisdiction over and all the proprietary rights in the area required for the reservoir basin and that, subject to such cession the area should remain a portion of the Bilaspur state as at present. The transaction would thus be closely analogous to the ordinary cession of exclusive jurisdiction in the Railway lands to the paramount power of the Indian states.”<sup>8</sup>

Hence, the leading cause of concern for the Punjab Government was the Raja of Bilaspur, an authority of an independent principality who had to bear the loss of land and get his people dislocated without any benefit. The dam would have inundated his large domain; therefore, negotiations with the Raja were necessary. He would have only consented if the Punjab Government’s demands were realistic or acceptable. Archival records reveal that the Punjab Government prioritized the Bhakra project, showing little concern for the people in the submerged villages.

## 5 The Wylie committee report and the safety of the site

Although the Bhakra dam proposal of 1919 could not materialize, it was still a step toward its construction. As the work on the Sutlej Valley Project advanced, attention was again directed to the Bhakra Dam project. The project was again revived in 1924. Dr. E. S. Pinfold, Chief Geologist of the Geological Survey of India, thoroughly studied the

Bhakra dam site (Khosla, 2013, p. 11). A committee of four renowned engineers and geologists, including Mr. Wiley, an expert on high masonry dams in the United States and a consulting engineer on dams to the USA government, was further formed in 1927 to inspect the site and make a report on the viability and safety of building the dam. Their report was wholly satisfactory, and it was decided that a dam could be built safely and effectively. The committee suggested that the dam’s intended height might be increased. They suggested storing water at reservoir level (RL) 1600, which was chosen as the elevation of the dam since it was physically feasible and wouldn’t jeopardize Bilaspur city. As a result, the consensus at the time was that the site had already been developed, and a dam 500 feet high with a storage capacity of  $4\frac{3}{4}$  million-foot acres of water were preferred to the initial proposal’s  $2\frac{1}{2}$  million-foot acres of water storage capacity.<sup>9</sup> AN Khosla agrees regarding the proposal of the increased height and reservoir level by the Wylie Committee and also adds that “A special subdivision was also opened in 1932 to prepare a fresh project based on the recommendations of the Wylie Committee, which was completed in 1934–35” (Khosla, 2013, p. 12).

The archival records shed light on why the project could not go ahead after the Wylie Committee report. The 1919 project proposal was to be revised, and fresh surveys were to be conducted, which meant a lot of expenditure. The Punjab government was not certain that after spending money on surveys and projects, the Government of India would give its approval for the dam. In 1928, there was a reference of the Punjab Government to the Government of India in the archival records stating, “When after surveys the project was submitted in due course of time it would be acceptable to the Government of India.” According to the archival records, the other reason for the delay in the project was that it was essential to obtain the views of certain Indian States before implementing the final project in 1928.<sup>10</sup>

## 6 Indus discharge committee

With regard to obtaining the views of certain Indian states, the government decided to take the opinion of the Bombay government before giving assurance to the Punjab government regarding the Bhakra dam project’s future. This gave rise to the question of apportionment of water of the river Indus and its tributaries between the provinces of Bombay and Punjab, and the result was the Indus Discharge

<sup>6</sup> National Archives of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, H. Wilberforce to Political Secretary Government of India*, 9th January 1937, Punjab State Agency Lahore, progs, nos. 139-G/29 vol. II, p. 118.

<sup>7</sup> National Archives of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, Punjab State Residency, 1938, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, Punjab State Agency, 1936, progs, nos. 139-G/29 vol. II, p. 114.

<sup>9</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, Punjab State Agency, 1936, progs, nos. 139-G/29 vol. II, p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, Punjab State Agency, 1936, progs, nos. 139-G/29 vol. II, p. 113.



Committee coming into action. In March 1929, the Punjab government received a letter from the Government of India containing a copy of the report of the Indus discharge committee. In their recommendations, the committee suggested to the Governments of Bombay and Punjab to appoint a Superintending Engineer each to investigate jointly and submit a report on the probable effects of Bhakra dam on the inundation canals in Sindh, which have their heads between Mithankot and Sukkar. The report of Superintending Engineers would make it possible for the committee to devise measures for the project to go ahead. The question of water distribution between the two provinces was left for them to consider.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the recommendations of the Indus Discharge Committee mentioned above, Mr. Nicholson and Trench were placed on special duty, and both concerned governments accepted their joint report. After Bombay agreed to the proceedings, the Punjab government decided to proceed with the Bhakra dam scheme. The above-cited document also ascertains the views of Indian States affected by the project, the Government of India, by letter No: 1.R.73, dated May 28, 1929, accorded permission to the Indian States being addressed through their political officers concerned for the preparation of the project in close touch with the Engineer of the Bombay Government to evolve a scheme in which the agreement of all parties might be assured.

Another point of consideration and decision with the Indian states concerned was the vital point of the reservoir site to be secured. The archival record makes it clear that Raja of Bilaspur was ready to negotiate but wanted compensation both in cash and kind and the adjacent territory from Hoshiarpur or Kangra district, paying as much revenue as the area proposed to be acquired. From 1919 until 1931, as the records make it clear, there was no communication between the Punjab Government regarding the Bhakra dam and the Raja of Bilaspur, and in the intervening period, the Punjab Government was busy checking the soundness of the scheme and settlement about water with Sindh.<sup>12</sup> These references suggest that even at this time, the issue of Bilaspur state, where quite a significant disturbance was expected, was being treated lightly. In contrast, the issue of resolving the water dispute with Sindh and the benefiting states of Bikaner, Patiala, Jind, Faridkot, and Nabha was given considerable weight. Wylie Committee report was completed in 1934–35. But this revised proposal, as mentioned by AN Khosla, also shared the same fate as the earlier one and was put into cold storage as preference was given to the Haveli

and Thal Projects, both in Western Punjab, and with greater political backing.

## 7 Survey of 1931–1932

Although there was no final decision regarding the execution of the project between the Raja of Bilaspur and the Punjab Government, the surveys were still going on. A letter from the Chief Secretary, Government of Punjab to the Resident for Punjab States, dated September 16, 1938, provides evidence that surveys were also carried out in 1931–1932 during the winters at the suggestion of the Raja of Bilaspur. In the survey, the limits of submergence with a 500-foot dam were marked on the ground, and concrete Burjies were built at about half-mile intervals on RL 1600 contour. These were transferred on village shajras (documents prepared in every estate at the time of settlement, it forms a part of record rights) by the Patwaris lent by the Bilaspur Durbar at the cost of the Punjab Government, as well as the details of areas and property which were to be submerged. The state authorities retained the original shajras on which the RL 1600 contour was marked.<sup>13</sup> The survey was perhaps meant to give an idea about the land to be acquired, and it was beneficial to both the Punjab Government and the Raja of Bilaspur. The survey also indicates that the construction process was still ongoing.

## 8 The demand for Bhakra dam project in the period of 1935–1936

The talks to construct or go ahead with the Bhakra dam scheme went on through 1935 and 1936, for which we have references in the Archival records. The two hurdles in the construction of the Bhakra dam at this time were (i) negotiation with the Raja of Bilaspur, and (ii) approvals by the Government of India.

In 1935, a letter by the Chief Secretary Government of Punjab in which Nawab Muzaffar Khan (revenue member of the Punjab Government) along with Nicholson came to discuss the question of reopening the Bhakra dam subject with the Raja of Bilaspur regarding compensation in the form of land and revenue rights. He proposed that the Raja of Bilaspur should be consulted regarding the suggestion that they

<sup>11</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, Punjab State Agency, 1936, progs, nos. 139-G/29 vol. II, p. 97.

<sup>12</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, Punjab State Agency, 1936, progs, nos. 139-G/29 vol. II, p. 114.

<sup>13</sup> National Archives of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, J.D. Penny to Resident Punjab States, 16th September 1938, Punjab States Residency, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, p. 1–2.



should be given revenue rights without revenue jurisdiction in plots of valuable lands in the Nili Bar colony.<sup>14</sup>

## 9 Proposal of Punjab government for the Raja of Bilaspur in 1936

The Bhakra Dam file of 1936 in the archival record shows that in April of 1935, a conference including the Member of Revenue, Chief Engineer and Financial Commissioner, and the Agent to the Governor of Punjab discussed the subject of Bhakra Dam. Subsequently, the Government of Punjab was supplied with the tentative proposal for compensation for the area required for the discussion with the Raja of Bilaspur Durbar.<sup>15</sup> In a letter dated March 21, 1936, from Lahore to the Raja of Bilaspur, we find the proposal of the Punjab Government regarding the Bhakra dam. This proposal was tentative, and the Punjab government was again hopeful that it would form a basis for the discussion with the Bilaspur Durbar. The entire document has been given in supplementary material as Annexure-III.

### 9.1 Loss of Bilaspur and proposal for compensation

According to the proposal of 1936, the total area required for the Dam was 201,146 acres, and if the Dam came into existence, it would mean the submergence of 171 villages and a portion of the town of Bilaspur. Raja of Bilaspur had to cede all jurisdictions to submerge the areas. Punjab Government, in return, agreed to give 5000 acres of land in the Nili Bar Colony of Punjab, and in addition, the Raja was to be exempted from paying the Nazrana of 8000 per annum for the Parganas of Baseh and Bachertu. The document specifies that the land to be allotted was suitably located and fertile. It was mentioned that sovereign rights to the Raja in the Nili Bar Colony would not be granted and would remain with the British Government.

### 9.2 Bilaspur Raja's views on Bhakra dam proposal of 1936

From a letter of the Raja of Bilaspur to Col. Robson (Agent to the Governor General Punjab States) in 1936, the views of the Raja of Bilaspur, Anand Chand, become clear on the Bhakra Dam proposal.<sup>16</sup> The entire document has been given in supplementary material as Annexure-IV. He writes that

according to the proposal, if the reservoir level is kept at 1600, it would mean the submergence of the Capital town, palaces, buildings, several roads, bridges, etc. As a vast area would be submerged, its loss valuation would require time and money. The cultivators will have to leave their ancestral lands, hence, they must be convinced and handled tactfully. So, the Raja demanded a sum of Rs. 20,000 to evaluate the entire loss.

### 9.3 Weak case of the Punjab Government and demand of assurance from the Government of India

The demand of Rs. 20,000 by the Raja of Bilaspur for preliminary investigations made the Punjab Government insecure. This was because the Raja clarified that he would reserve the right to refuse the proposal. The archival records prove that the Punjab Government's case was weak on both sides, i.e., before the Raja of Bilaspur and the Government of India.

A letter from Puckle to the Agent of Governor General Punjab States, "The attitude of the subjects of Bilaspur, who will be affected by the project, maybe a very relevant factor in the final decision, and at present, it is not known what their attitude is going to be. Government of India, however, may at once take the view suggested in the letter under reply and hold that the project is not one which in any circumstances be approved by them. So in this situation, advancing Rs. 20,000 to the Bilaspur Durbar may be a waste of money."<sup>17</sup>

In the same letter from the Chief Secretary (Government of Punjab) to the Agent of the Governor General, we find that the Punjab Government was trying to justify its case before the Government of India. The plea extended was that "the Bhakra dam project would materially benefit the Indian States of Bikaner, Patiala, Jind, Faridkot, and Nabha and that the benefit accruing to these states would far outweigh the inconvenience and disturbance caused to the subjects of the Bilaspur State." The Punjab Government presented a memorandum outlining that, "out of the total area of 20,146 acres to be submerged 5005 acres of land is only cultivable while 2027 acres under grass and 6037 acres under the jungle. The project would involve the removal of most villages, which are hamlets, submerge part of the capital, and some temples".<sup>18</sup> The attempt was to prove that the submergence of 171 villages, towns, and other property was a small loss.

<sup>14</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, Punjab State Agency, 1936, progs, nos. 139-G/29 vol. II, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, Punjab State Agency, 1936, progs, nos. 139-G/29 vol. II, p. 115.

<sup>16</sup> National Archives of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, Anand Chand to Robson*, 1st August 1936, Punjab State Agency Lahore, progs, nos.139-G/29 vol. II, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> National Archives of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, Puckle to The Agent of Governor General Punjab States*, 17th December 1936, Punjab States Agency, progs, nos.139-G/29 vol. II, p. 110.

<sup>18</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, Punjab State Agency, 1936, progs, nos. 139-G/29 vol. II. pp. 116–117.





#### 9.4 Government of India's stand on the Bhakra dam project of 1936

The letters in the archival records show that the Bhakra dam was subject to checks by the Indian government. The Secretary reveals the real position of His Excellency, the Crown Representative, in his letter to the residents of the Punjab States on May 28, 1937, regarding the assurance of the Government of India. The Secretary replies, "I am to say that the answer to this question is in negative. The project will be duly considered on its merits when it is ready for examination". Further, the crown representative would be fully satisfied only if "the provision of a satisfactory form of compensation and a suitable means of livelihood for the state subjects whose dispossession would be involved. The number of those who would be affected in this way has not been indicated, but it seems probably that they would amount to something in the neighbourhood of 20,000 or even more. It seems mass transplantation of so large number of people from Bilaspur to Nili Bar Colony could be expected to prove a successful experiment."<sup>19</sup> So, the tentative proposal by the Punjab Government regarding compensation to the Bilaspur Durbar was unsuccessful. Interestingly, compensation progress could be witnessed as we see in the 1936 Punjab Government agreed to pay 5000 acres land to the dispossessed people in the Nili Bar Colony and many more other concessions. However, no progress has been made on the issue of extending sovereign rights to the Raja of Bilaspur. The disagreement of the Raja of Bilaspur and the Indian Government's sanction, however, prevented the dam from being built in 1936.

#### 10 The 1938 survey proposal and the memorandum by Bilaspur Raja

In 1938, the Punjab Government was now re-examining the Bhakra dam project. It even considered reducing the project's height so that a small area to that of the earlier proposal may be submerged.<sup>20</sup> The Punjab Government was considering building a dam 400 feet high and needed the Raja of Bilaspur's permission to survey his territory.

The letter included the full proposal for the survey party from Punjab to be sent, along with requests for the state of Bilaspur to permit the presence of a Punjab land acquisition officer. The Punjab Government was to cover the entire expense and requested an early reply so that survey parties could reach Bilaspur as soon as possible.<sup>21</sup>

Punjab Government's impatience becomes evident when the Governor of Punjab asks the resident "about the best procedure for the Punjab Government to adopt in approaching the Bilaspur Durbar for permission to erect Bhakra dam."<sup>22</sup> However, earlier, the Punjab Government did not even care to reply to the letter of Raja of Bilaspur regarding the 1936 proposal.<sup>23</sup> In 1938, the Punjab Government tried to conduct surveys to determine channel alignment in the Punjab states of Patiala, Nabha, and Jind. The surveys were carried out because the Punjab Government wanted to assess the project's total cost and reach an agreement with all the parties concerned. Still, the Punjab Government has not gotten any consent from the Raja of Bilaspur regarding the survey.

In response to the Punjab Government proposal, the Raja forwarded a Memorandum prepared by him dealing with some issues that he wishes to discuss at a joint meeting to be attended by a representative of the Punjab Government, the Political Agent, and himself and till then he did not wish for a fresh survey of the project as proposed by the Punjab Government."<sup>24</sup> The important points of the memorandum which the Raja wanted to discuss are given below, and the whole memorandum is given in Annexure V as supplementary material.

The Memorandum of the Raja outlined several demands, including a 1938 demarcation and census, remitting tribute from the Bilaspur State for the Parganas of Baseh and Bachretoo, protecting royalties for building materials, building new bridges, roads, telephone, and telegraph lines, providing submerged land at a fixed rate, and ensuring local labor and water irrigation. Land for the dispossessed people is provided in Kangra, along with sovereign rights. The Raja also demanded the British Government take responsibility for the loss of territory, life, and property due to dam construction.

<sup>19</sup> National Archives of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, Secretary to His Excellency the Crown Representative to The Resident of Punjab States*, 28th May 1937, Punjab States Agency, progs, nos. 139-G/29 vol. II, pp. 122–123.

<sup>20</sup> National Archives of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, Political Agent Punjab Hill State to Secretary Resident Punjab States*, 16th July 1938, Punjab States Agency, progs, nos. 139-G/29 vol. II, pp. 126.

<sup>21</sup> National Archives of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, J.D. Penny to Resident Punjab States*, 16th September 1938, Punjab States Residency, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, p. 1–2.

<sup>22</sup> National Archives of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, Political Department to Harold Wilberforce-Bell*, 28th September 1938, Punjab States Residency, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, Foreign Secretary Bilaspur State to Political Agent Punjab States*, 5th July 1938, Punjab State Agency, progs, nos. 139-G/29 vol. II, p. 127.

<sup>24</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, Political Agent Punjab States to Wakefield Esquire*, 25th October 1938, Punjab State Residency, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, p. 22.



From the letter of the Chief Secretary of Punjab States to the residents of the Punjab States, it becomes clear that the Punjab Government decided to send their representatives to Bilaspur on December 12, 1938.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, the meeting was held at Bilaspur from 16 to 19th December. The proceedings of the meetings have been given in Annexure VI, shown in the Supplementary file.

### 10.1 Demands made by the Raja of Bilaspur

As per the copy of the letter from the Political Agent, Punjab Hill States, to the Secretary of Resident for Punjab, states that the Raja of Bilaspur put the following demands in the meeting: The Raja demanded an area equivalent to the acquired area, plus 15% for forcible dispossession in the Hathawat area of Una Tehsil, along with sovereign rights. He also demanded 32,000 acres for 4000 acres of cultivated land in the Nili Bar Colony, eight times the area acquired. The demand included no residence conditions and treating all grantees as agriculturists. The land should be selected mutually and allotted in compact blocks. The demand chart included financial assistance for transfer from Bilaspur to Nili Bar, a metalled road from Kiratpur to Swarghat and Bilaspur, and 250 kilowatts of commercially produced electricity from Bhakra. The Raja also requested 75 lakhs to cover the scheme's loss of state revenue and property.

### 10.2 Demands accepted in the meeting

The letter mentioned above by RR Burnett (Political Agent in Punjab Hill States) to the Secretary for Punjab States also mentions the demands accepted in the meeting. The Punjab Government agreed to lease the flooded area for 999 years, ensuring sovereignty, jurisdiction, and ownership. The government also decided to compensate water mills and protect existing ferry rights. The demand for a road built from Rupar to Bilaspur and Kiratpur to Swarghat was accepted. The government agreed to build bridges at Gambhar and other nuddies, open a telephone exchange in Bilaspur, and allow cultivators to use submerged land on reappearance. The government decided to employ local labor and committed to enabling water for irrigation after knowing the requirement and accepting liability for any loss or damage to life or property. The pending demands were to be addressed with the Punjab Government and then presented to the Raja of Bilaspur. These demands were crucial for shaping the geography and history of Bilaspur State in the coming years.

<sup>25</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, J.D. Penny to Resident of Punjab States, 29th November 1938, Punjab State Residency, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, p. 49.

## 11 Bhakra Dam 1939 and the negotiations

The archival record shows ongoing discussions over the Bhakra dam project in 1939. The Punjab Government was keen to resume negotiations with the Raja of Bilaspur, suggesting a meeting at Simla in May. Major RR Burnett (Political Agent in Punjab Hill States) was asked to confirm the Raja's willingness to discuss the project with the Resident and Punjab Government next month.<sup>26</sup> The meeting took place on May 25, 1939. A copy of the meeting proceedings is attached as Annexure VII, given in Supplementary material.

### 11.1 Main issues discussed in the meeting

At the outset of the meeting, the Raja of Bilaspur stated that a cultivated area of 4285 acres is likely to be submerged, affecting 103 villages with a population of 12,066. The land revenue collected from the area was Rs. 21,000. Of the population, 6812 would be affected by cultivation, while 5254 would only be affected by grazing rights.

The primary demand was sovereignty over land in Hathawat, Una Tehsil, based on two cultivated acres for one. Raja of Bilaspur refused to land in Kangra due to natural boundaries and potential conflicts. Raja claimed his sovereign rights and argued that submergence would cause a reduction of subjects and state size. The Minister of Finance argued about legal challenges and the Crown prerogative, which required support from provincial and central governments. If the land is allotted at Nili Bar, the Raja argued for 8-acre to one-cultivated acre land, exempting subjects from the Punjab Alienation and Land Acquisition Act.

The Raja of Bilaspur inquired about compensation for damage to state property in Punjab. The Financial Commissioner, Development explained that compensation in Punjab is limited to land value plus 15% for forced acquisition. In the case of Bilaspur, he suggested giving them the area acquired three times, but this was a personal opinion. The Raja of Bilaspur's valuation for damage to state property showed a claim of 25 lakhs, leading to a claim of 75 lakhs. Objections were raised, but Raja argued that it is impossible to assess the price of everything and that the Sufferer State should receive more than it loses. Finally, the Hon'ble Minister for Finance informed Raja that the Punjab Government is considering an alternative plan due to cost and risk.

In the concluding moments, the resident used pressure tactics to persuade the Raja of Bilaspur to agree to the Viceroy's decision if negotiations over the Bhakra dam ended

<sup>26</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, Resident Punjab States to R.R. Burnett, 25th April 1939, Punjab State Residency, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, p. 89.



in a deadlock. The Raja agreed in exchange for the Indian government taking responsibility for displeasure among the inhabitants. The resident assured the government's full support in case of difficulties between His Highness and his people. However, the meeting revealed confusion on issues such as sovereignty, compensation, land allotment to the oustees, and the jurisdiction and administration of the displaced people. The Punjab Government was unwilling to compensate the suffering state and was confused, looking for an alternate plan even in 1939.

## 12 Newspaper cuttings and politics on the issue of Bhakra Dam in the year 1939

Newspaper cuttings in the archival record of the year 1939 show that how the politics in Punjab revolved around the issue of the Bhakra dam.<sup>27</sup> The newspaper articles carried titles like *The Bhakra Dam: Boon to Rohtak and Hissar, Where is Bhakra Dam Scheme, Bhakra Dam Project, a "Forlorn Hope", Bhakra Dam Scheme: Bilaspur Ruler's demand reduced – Hope Revived, Bhakra Dam Scheme, "Learn a lesson from Rajkot", "Must Carry out Scheme", "Why not carry out Alternative Scheme", "Don't Approve of Forcible Methods"* portray the propaganda over the dam that was being raised in the Punjab legislative assembly. These articles clearly state that the blame game over the delay in the dam construction had already started amongst the representatives of the Punjab Government. The various cuttings of the newspaper found in the archival record are shown in Annexure VIII in the Supplementary file.

Newspaper articles indicate that the Raja of Bilaspur was being portrayed as the one causing delay, and pressure was being created to please the people and politicians of Punjab. Finance Minister of Punjab stated that geological experts and engineering authorities had thoroughly examined the Bhakra Dam Scheme, and technical objections from neighboring provinces had disappeared. Negotiations were now underway with a Hill State. The article, 'Bhakra Dam Project, a 'Forlorn Hope' in the Tribune on 16th March 1939, shows that the Bhakra Dam Scheme's hopes were disappointed, and negotiations with Bilaspur Durbar did not reach a satisfactory conclusion. As a result, the Punjab Government is now seeking an alternative dam on the river Beas.

Pandit Shri Ram Sharma criticized the Punjab Government for not implementing the Bhakra Dam scheme after 20 years of debate. He suggested they should influence the Raja of Bilaspur through the Indian government to address

the unreasonable demands. Revenue Minister Shri Sunder Singh Majthia responded by expressing his desire to complete the scheme without considering its productivity or non-productivity.

Opposition leader Dr. Gopi Chand, in the Tribune article, questioned the Government's decision to continue with the Bhakra dam project due to the urgent water needs of Haryana. The Premier argued that such schemes take time, especially when dealing with neighboring states. However, a 1939 article titled "*Bhakra Dam Scheme—Bilaspur Ruler Demand Reduced*" in the Tribune reported that the Ruler of Bilaspur reduced his demand to half of the original sum, reviving hopes for the construction of the Bhakra dam.

After 1940, the construction of the Bhakra dam in Punjab became a significant issue for the Punjab Government, with leaders advocating for political and economic benefits. Sunder Singh Majithia, the Minister of Revenue, addressed the dam issue, but political issues surrounding Bilaspur's submergence and location were to be resolved first. Chhotu Ram, a Rohtak-based famine-stricken man, believed the dam was crucial for Punjab's prosperity and ending starvation and believed electricity was the key to success (Khosla, 2013, p. 13). Political forces in Punjab exerted pressure on the Centre and the Raja and created favorable opinions on the dam's necessity both within and outside the legislative assembly.

## 13 Bhakra demand and change in Raja's approach 1940's

The Punjab Government's alternate plan from 1939 failed to materialize, and demand for the dam increased in Hissar and other districts of the famine-stricken Ambala division. As a result, the Punjab Government had no choice but to pick up the pace of talks with the Raja of Bilaspur. The letter dated May 28, 1940, from Barnes Court to Resident for the Punjab States confirms that the Punjab Government was ready to resume conversation with his Highness the Raja of Bilaspur about the Bhakra Dam Scheme.<sup>28</sup>

In 1940, the Archival records reveal a significant shift in the Raja of Bilaspur's approach to negotiation with the Punjab Government. In the document, Mr. Listner of the Punjab Irrigation Department says, "His Highness now says that the transfer of Hathawat tahsil to Bilaspur is not as essential to Bilaspur's acceptance of the scheme; he has been going carefully into the question of cultivable wasteland in other parts of the state and is certain that he could

<sup>27</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, Punjab State Residency, 1938, progs. nos. G-342/38/I, pp. 149–152.

<sup>28</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, Barnes Court to C.P. Skrine*, 28th May 1940, Punjab State Residency, progs. nos. G-342/38/I, p. 125.



find room for the dispossessed population without acquiring Hathawat. But it would be a different and expensive business owing to opposition from the hill folk whose land will be acquired.<sup>29</sup> This sudden change in the Raja's approach is incomprehensible and will remain a research subject for scholars. However, this change became a basis for negotiations to be resumed with a new mindset as an agreement seemed possible.

## 14 Correspondence over Bhakra 1942–1944

The National Archive of India lacks extensive information on the correspondence between the Punjab Government and the Raja of Bilaspur between 1941 and 1943. The leading cause of the Bhakra dam project's delay between 1940 and July 1943 was the Second World War, as evidenced by a letter from the Political Department, New Delhi, to the Resident Punjab States in 1943 that there was no conversation regarding the Dam during this period.<sup>30</sup>

A letter from AN Khosla to the Secretary (West) is in the archival records. IB contains a memorandum of informal talks with his Highness the Raja of Bilaspur, which certifies that talks were being carried out even in January 1944 with the Raja of Bilaspur.<sup>31</sup> The Memorandum of Informal Talks with Raja of Bilaspur has been shown in Annexure IX in the Supplementary file.

The memorandum reveals Raja agreed to build a 500-foot dam and relinquish sovereignty over British territory in exchange for land in Bilaspur to be submerged in a reservoir. He emphasized the need for revenue from the Hathawat area to give Bilaspur Durbar a sense of sovereignty. Raja also offered the option of compact blocks at Hathawat or perennially irrigated land in Nili Bar Colony. The reasons behind Raja's agreement to forego sovereignty rights are unclear, and archival records do not show any pressure from the Indian Government.

## 15 Bhakra Dam 1944

A letter to the Political Department (New Delhi) from AN Khosla dated July 4, 1944, informs that there were informal discussions with Punjab Officials and Raja of Bilaspur, and the dam site was visited by Dr. JL Savage (Chief design

Engineer, US) and the Punjab technical officers concerned. The Punjab Government aimed to prepare a draft agreement for formal discussion under the supervision of AN Khosla, which was to be submitted to the Crown Representative and Central Government's comments. The Raja of Bilaspur expressed positive sentiments about the dam proposal and sought a consulting engineer to advise him on the project.<sup>32</sup>

Accordingly, a draft agreement was prepared between the Punjab Government and the Raja of Bilaspur, resulting from four days of discussion from 25 to 28th August 1944 at Bilaspur. The Punjab Irrigation Secretariat Lahore sent a copy of the same agreement to the Residents of the Punjab States on September 2, 1944.<sup>33</sup> The draft agreement is a significant historical document. It was the first time the Raja of Bilaspur had agreed to the proposal, signed by the Governor of Punjab and Raja Anand Chand. A copy of the detailed draft agreement has been shown in Annexure X and given in Supplementary material.

### 15.1 A brief outline and the outcome of the draft agreement

As per the draft agreement, the proposed Bhakra dam will be located in the narrow gorge downstream of the Bhakra village. The crest of the dam will be about 500 feet above the foundation rock. The reservoir level shall be limited to 1600 feet above mean sea level and 20 feet below the 1600 RL. Burjie in the Sandhu field at Bilaspur. The Punjab Government shall be responsible for seeing that these levels are not exceeded. According to the agreement, Darbar was granted a lease for 999 years.

The agreement's draft makes it obvious that the Raja of Bilaspur successfully upheld some of his major demands but lost over a major issue. He successfully defended his subject's legal rights and won some favors for Bilaspur State but could not fulfill his wish to extend sovereign rights over the lands to be allotted as compensation. The king agreed to acquire proprietary rights of perennially irrigated lands in Punjab to compensate for losing sovereignty rights. He saved his capital city from submerging under the lake and obtained numerous concessions such as: including the right to use river water, double the amount of cultivable land lost at Nili Bar Colony, royalties for construction materials, exemption from the Punjab Alienation Act, land revenue collection, telephone and telegraph services, metalled roads, bridges, fishing rights, employment for the local labor force, usage of submerged areas on reappearance,

<sup>29</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, Punjab State Residency, 1938, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, p. 386.

<sup>30</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, Resident Punjab States to Pol India*, New Delhi, 22nd July 1943, Punjab State Residency, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, p. 213.

<sup>31</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project*, Punjab State Residency, 1938, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, p. 215.

<sup>32</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project A.N Khosla to PolIndia*, New Delhi, 22nd July 1943, Punjab State Residency, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, pp. 219–220.

<sup>33</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, Punjab Irrigation Secretariat to Resident Punjab States*, 2nd September 1944, Punjab State Residency, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, p. 225.





cost-free hydroelectricity, and additional administration costs. These requests reasonably provided fair compensation and a decent standard of living for his people. According to the 1919 first draft proposal, the Punjab Government was considering giving cash compensation only, so these concessions were a massive victory for the Raja of Bilaspur. On the other hand, the Punjab Government reached a compromise and obtained a fair deal for the immeasurable losses due to the dam construction.

## 15.2 Fears of the Raja after signing the draft agreement

### (i) Fear related to the creation of dam

As is evident from the archival records, even after agreeing to the dam, the Raja of Bilaspur was worried about the future of the Bilaspur State and his subjects who were to settle in the Nili Bar Colony. The letter by the Raja of Bilaspur on November 5, 1944, to the Resident of Punjab states makes it clear that there were still three points on which the Raja of Bilaspur wanted an expert opinion.<sup>34</sup>

- Sutlej's water level near Sandhu Maidan raises concerns about seepage and fissures.
- Bhakra dam creates a 50–50-mile lake, potentially causing geological issues and mineral wealth inaccessibility.
- Lake uneven sides may lead to landslides and upheavals, and silt may widen river tributaries.

Archival documents reveal that Mr. Salvage visited Bhakra in January 1945, assured there was no danger at Bhakra, and suggested protective works might be required for the Bilaspur Maidan. Regarding the geological expert, AN Khosla's article informs us that Dr. FA Nickel, an American Geologist, advice was sought in early 1945 and carried out geological investigations on the dam site until 1947 (Khosla, 2013, pp. 13–14).

### (ii) Fear of lands to be allotted in the Nili Bar Colony

The letter from the Raja of Bilaspur to the residents for the Punjab States reveals that in 1945, the Raja of Bilaspur visited Nili Bar Colony to find displaced people's lands. He had demanded quality land but found that out of 10,000 acres of estimated land, only 3000 acres were under cultivation, half in unmanageable contours. He requested consideration of adjoining high-quality lands advertised for auction by the Punjab Government before finalizing the mutual selection of land in exchange.<sup>35</sup> According to the archival record, the Punjab Government was reluctant for the Raja

or his friends to visit Nili Bar Colony themselves since it would have produced confusion. The Raja's requested lands could not be used as compensation for his drowned domain because the Punjab Government had already allotted them.

## 16 Bhakra Dam Project 1945

The 1945 references in the archival records regarding the Bhakra dam project are proof of the correspondence between the concerned parties. The draft agreement was already signed, and only formal discussions were left. The draft was prepared in conjunction with the legal remembrance and was discussed with his Highness on the 21st and 22nd of December 1944. On January 16, 1945, a letter from the Punjab Irrigation Secretariat to the residents of Punjab states referring to the revised draft agreement with slight differences was submitted to the Punjab government for orders.<sup>36</sup> The revised draft agreement has been shown in Annexure XI and given in the Supplementary file. Two copies of the draft were sent to the Secretary to His Excellency, the Crown Representative, hoping a meeting could be convened early with the representative of all concerned in Delhi for a formal discussion of the draft. The resident was also directed to invite his Highness the Raja of Bilaspur to send representatives for a joint survey with the Punjab Government early.

## 17 Preliminary works begin

In his article, AN Khosla writes that in 1945, he was transferred to the Government of India as a Consulting Engineer and Chairman of the Central Water and Power Commission. Soon after, the work on the Bhakra dam project with the addition of Nangal Hydel canal was formally authorized for construction, and work on roads, railways, buildings, and other essential preliminaries, like procurement of plant and equipment, began. The process was, however, slow and restricted because of political uncertainty on the eve of the transfer of power in 1947 (Khosla, 2013, p. 14). Hence, the road to the construction of the dam was clear after the Raja had signed the draft agreement of 1944. In 1945–46, specifications and designs were prepared by the International Engineering Company of Denver, USA, for a dam with a reservoir level of 1580 and a roadway level 1600. Immediately

<sup>34</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, Anand Chand to C.L. Corfield*, 5th November 1944, Punjab State Residency, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, p. 250.

<sup>35</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, Anand Chand to Corfield*, 3rd February 1945, Punjab State Residency, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, p. 298.

<sup>36</sup> National Archive of India, *Bhakra Dam Project, Punjab State Residency*, 1938, progs, nos. G-342/38/I, p. 276.



after the partition, the height question was reopened, and the capital town of Bilaspur once again came under threat.

## 18 Conclusion

Since its inception, the Bhakra Dam's history has been full of apprehensions for Bilaspur state. Merely accepting the initial proposals of the Punjab government would have jeopardized Bilaspur's position. The 1919 proposal of the Punjab Government proves that the Punjab Government wanted to get the approval of the Raja with only cash compensation without caring much for the affected people of Bilaspur. Raja Bije Chand and Anand Chand of Bilaspur were equally worried about their state, subjects, and sovereign rights. Over time, the construction issue was politicized and emerged as the primary topic of discussion amongst the Punjab Government, the Raja of Bilaspur, and the Government of India.

The Government of India also made it clear that for approval of the project, proper compensation and secure livelihood for the dam-affected people was essential, and the Punjab Government also acknowledged the fact that if it has to go ahead with Bhakra dam, it will have to compensate the Raja and the affected people reasonably. Finally, the Punjab government successfully managed to convince the Raja, but the acceptance on the part of the Raja remains contentious and a matter of debate as it included losing adjoining areas of Hathawat and Hoshiarpur and even his sovereign rights. The archival records indicate no pressure on the Raja and independence of India, and the partition further complicates the whole matter. However, around 18,000 displaced villagers of Bilaspur who were to bear the brunt of displacement were still unaware of the upcoming situation and the consequences they would have to face for generations to come.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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