

Stagnation in Punjab: The State needs a Socio-economic Revolution

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The recent Punjab election verdict clearly shows that to most ordinary citizens, there isn't much difference between various political parties. In Punjab, the politicians appear to be singularly insensitive to the problems plaguing the state. They remain busy in one-upmanship, in mudslinging and trading the same old charges and abuses. What is it that plagues the highest per capita income state of India, the green revolution's miracle state and its hard working, forever optimistic, if native people? The slowest growing economy, plateauing agricultural yields, ruined ecology, farmer suicides, unemployment, low sex ratios, dowry deaths, smack addiction... the list could go on.

Whatever happened to the golden state? No doubt, two decades of disturbances and militancy took its toll. But can we lay the blame for the lack of sustainable growth on those decades? The Punjab story is one of mismanagement and an ostrich-like attitude towards problems. If we do not acknowledge our problems, they will go away, seems to be the attitude.

The disaster in Punjab has been a long time in the making. For one, this is a state where economic development has not travelled hand in hand with social development. While per capita incomes rose and poverty declined and many Punjabis became obscenely rich, literacy, education and health care did not spread at the same rate. Literacy remains far below that of Kerala and even neighbouring Himachal Pradesh, which was once a part of it; there is a gap of about 15 percentage points between male and female literacy. Punjab is one of the few rich states to continue to have relatively high maternal mortality rates (178 per 1,000)- worse than Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Haryana and Gujarat. Infant mortality rates are also higher than those of many other less prosperous states. The sex ratio, abysmal for a century, declined further from 882 in 1991 to 874 in 2001. The child sex ratio fell even more.

Given these dismal statistics, does anyone care whether the Akalis or the Congress rule? If politicians were genuinely interested, they should have had a very sound idea of what ails Punjab, Farmers find themselves indebted. The inputs into agriculture grow more expensive leading to shallow profits when yields don't go sky-high anymore. Diversification never took off so farmers remain trapped in a wheat-rice cycle and hence at the mercy of government minimum support prices (MSPs) and subsidies. The land on which the majority of Punjabis are still dependent for a living can no longer support even two sons – hence many prosperous families are choosing to have only one child, a son.

The years of the green revolution had made people smell prosperity and, for some, real luxury. People got used to living standards and ostentatious lifestyles that eventually became unsustainable. The younger generations got themselves some education but this education was not the sort that led to lucrative jobs or entrepreneurial skills. What it did achieve was to make them unfit for agriculture. The young educated man wishes to pontificate and not get out there early in the morning to supervise the farm. His old father still does that while the bhaiyyas from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar do the actual work. The young man lounges in the courtyard, developing dangerous habits such as addiction to smack or other drugs.

The drug addiction problem has reached alarming proportion in the state. The warning bells have been ringing for a while but not many have paid attention. Local newspapers are full of

such reports but the national media turns a blind eye to it. Why? Perhaps because this is seen as a rich state's problem. Starvation deaths and farmer suicides evoke much more empathy and central government assistance when they take place in Andhra Pradesh or in Orissa. Shouldn't a rich state be able to handle such problems its own?

There is little realisation that whole generations are going to waste, caught in the poor education, unemployment, land needing even fewer people to work on it syndrome. In villages, a majority of young boys and men are affected. Parents talk about the sons of others being addicted while refusing to accept that their own sons are in the same trap. It is always some one else's son. Boys who do not get money from parents to feed their habit threaten to commit suicide.

Punjab needs to take bold and revolutionary steps. It needs to shed its 'agriculture', 'wheat bowl' image and take a few steps for its own well-being. First, it needs to drastically revamp its education system, both public and private, and go all out for top quality education. This will make its sons and daughters see that there are other ways of making a living than begging for paltry army or public sector jobs or sending people off to foreign lands. Second, it needs to reduce gender bias so that it can make better use of its intelligent, talented and hardworking women. It needs to lower maternal and infant mortality rates and to allow its girl children to be born. It needs to create (not provide) employment through diversification, even if diversification takes place within agriculture.

Let the young men and women decide whether they want to set up factories or sell tulips from their laptops. The politician needs to sell education and jobs to the Punjab peasant's sons and daughters.

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