

Punjab's never-ending woes



BY INVITATION
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The state finds itself in a precarious situation with no riparian claims to its rivers, poisoned groundwater, no industry and, above all, Centre's step-motherly treatment

PARTITION was a great disaster — lost lives, migration, and other horrors. We left the west canal colonies created by the Sikhs, and got one-third sandy land in return. Ludhiana was all *tibbas*, growing groundnut. The rivers were divided and Punjab got 15.8 million acre-foot (MAF). Against the Constitution and the riparian rights universally recognised, 8 MAF was gifted to Rajasthan, with no riparian claim to Punjab's rivers. Maharaja Ganga Singh, in 1920, paid royalties regularly, to take Punjab water for developing Ganganagar. In 1966, Punjab had a further triangular division. Again, by a central fiat, 7 MAF left to Punjab were divided 50:50 with Haryana. The upshot is that the owner of the three eastern rivers is left with 3.5 MAF only. Later, court judgments enhanced our worries. There is always a legal sword suspended somewhere above us.

Our grandfathers still settled themselves into quick productive work. We introduced the first tractors and the first shallow tubewells in the 1950s. The land security and tenant protection laws made our Punjab a land of self-cultivating peasant proprietors. In 1967-68, we grabbed the new wheat possibilities and began to feed the country. Our choice of crops was always dictated by the Government of India, by making policies



NO HOPE IN SIGHT: Odds seem to be heavily stacked against the people of Punjab. TRIBUNE/PHOTO

sued to Delhi. We were pushed always to grow grain, wheat and rice, to meet the Central deficits. I have lived to see a total summersault. Then UPA Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar announced in Chandigarh, "We do not any longer need your grain, do something else. India has enough foreign exchange to import, as needed."

Our groundwater is poisoned. The shallow tubewells have sunk to 300 ft or more, and Punjab depends upon them and not

canals for irrigation. The Ravi water is even now claimed for the Yamuna. If the Ravi is to be divided, the Yamuna, at the other end of the Punjab, needs to be shared in the joint pool. But, in a quite coup, in Delhi, the Yamuna water was divided between Haryana, UP and even Rajasthan. How and with what justice?

Where is Punjab to go from here? It has to somehow, find the alternative crops, fruits, vegetables, flowers, dairy, etc. Even here

brave efforts to export fruits and vegetables to Europe were stymied by negative aviation policies, blocking Amritsar airport. The lobby of private owners of Delhi airport, and powerful tourist lobbies there, would simply not allow this. As Rajya Sabha MP for 12 years in the UPA, I saw all this helplessly. Opening of trade with Pakistan and through Pakistan to Afghanistan and European countries such as Moscow, Paris, London et al., can be done, but the perpetual Kashmir quarrel ensures that for Punjab, the 1947 horrors continue. Ultimately, Punjab paid during wars in 1961, 1965... and continues to pay with a negative situation due to economic blockades.

The Vajpayee government's concessions to the hill states ensured that even our little rice shellers or small units moved to Baddi and other Himachal areas. These concessions simply exploited and even continue to do so. In the UPA-I, I remember bitterly complaining to the Prime Minister. He replied in utter frustration, that they would lose votes in Himachal, if he thought of correcting this.

When I joined Punjab administration in 1958, Kairon was *pradhan*. I have always thought the sole duty of any government is to give law and order, health and education to the citizens. He did this. There were no schools and metal roads in vil-

lages. I remember his push: "You do the earth work, and I will metal the road". I used to participate in the common village 'shramdaan'. He told every village "you build some rooms and I will open a primary school. If you build a few more, I will make it middle and even high". Today, I see that the Punjab Government has opted out of this fundamental duty to the people. Kerala does much, but we simply leave these essential needs of a citizen to others, howsoever exploitative they may be. This is sad.

The Army used to be villagers' great hope for service and pension. In Nehru's time, the policy was changed, and recruitments were made on population strength. So, Punjab villagers began to fade out of the armed forces. The same mechanism applies to the lakhs of Central police jobs. The average land holding is less than 2 acres. There is no industry in Punjab, the excuse being that you are on the border. Lahore can have industry, but Amritsar lost all the old ones like 'Dhariwal'.

The crisis is grave. The policy is that of a *kabutar*; close your eyes and all will be well. However, I still have faith in the great people of Punjab, whatever the difficulties, they shall overcome.

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