

# Travails of the Punjab

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Punjab has through the last 50 years gained as well as lost out in many ways, but not on its own terms. Perhaps the average Punjabi is justified in being disgruntled with the way the government has failed to address the state's long-standing problems.

The partition of India in 1947, the creation of Pakistan, and the division of the old Punjab, hit the Hindus and Sikhs the hardest. Lahore and all the urban centres, which the Hindu trading classes had created, were lost. The Jat Sikhs had created a granary for India, from 1890 onwards, when the British made the great canal colonies from the Jhelum, the Chenab, and the Ravi. Sargodha, Lyallpur, Montgomery and Pakpattan became famous names. The Sikhs had left the impoverished East Punjab for the frontier in the West. They struggled with the elements and by 1940 the fruits of their efforts were just beginning to materialise. In 1947, they lost it all. The land they left was irrigated and rich; they came to land sandy and poor. What is more, it was one-third of what they had left behind.

Jawaharlal Nehru's secretary Tarlok Singh—later founder of the Planning Commission, and the writer of its first three five year plans—created the *graded cut*; the big landowners' shares were slashed the most, while the small farmers were given the highest percentage of their original holding. At a stroke, Punjab had a peasant proprietorship of *yeomen farmers*, self-cultivating, proud and innovative. They had gone West as pioneers and brought back that bold spirit. They were clear that from far less and poor land, they had to make almost the same income, as they might have had in the West. They took to the innovations of tractors and shallow tube wells as early as in 1950–51. The city refugees came to Delhi and elsewhere in the North. Soon, they were on their feet and looking for prosperity.

## Partitioning Punjab

Nehru had promised “an area, where the Sikhs too could feel the glow of freedom” in 1946. Master Tara Singh straightaway took him up on that promise. East Punjab was constantly in political turmoil. In 1956, linguistic states were

created in India. Potti Sreeramulu fasted to death and got Andhra Pradesh. The States Reorganisation Commission refused a similar demand in Punjab. The struggle continued with satyagraha, meetings with the Prime Minister, hope and then despair. In 1965, after the war with Pakistan, a parliamentary committee was appointed and a Punjabi-speaking Punjab was accepted.

The decision which should have led to hope and progress was poisoned at the start. The boundary was to be fixed on the basis of the 1961 Census, which was false. A section of people in the urban areas were persuaded to disavow Punjabi. Even in Amritsar, it was claimed that they were Hindi-speaking! The Boundary Commission composed of three Indian Civil Service functionaries, guided by hidden persuaders, made a boundary, which left large Punjabi areas in Haryana. Sirsa district, which is almost entirely of Sikh refugees from the canal colonies, remained in Haryana. Kharar tehsil, including Chandigarh, was all to go to Haryana. There was much more. A hue and cry ensued. Reluctantly, the Kharar tehsil was left in Punjab, but Chandigarh was taken under central possession. It remains so after 50 years. Nehru had tried to revive Punjab's broken spirit by taking up Chandigarh, and the Bhakra dam. He came regularly to see these new temples of India. Both were taken away and controlled by the officers of the centre. After 50 years, I wonder if Punjab will be the only unfortunate state in India, or for that matter in the world, which will never have its own state capital. Is this possible? Will this happen or will, the people of Punjab in the coming decades again take up the struggle against such blatant injustice?

## Green Revolution

In the 1960s, India was dependent on the Public Law 480 gift wheat sent from the United States (us). President Lyndon Johnson demanded support in the Vietnam war. In that crisis, the Prime Minister asked C Subramaniam, the agriculture minister, to make a bid for self-sufficiency. He imported a shipload of high-yielding variety seeds of wheat

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from Norman Borlaug in Mexico. In 1967, Punjab took the risk of using the new seed. S S Grewal, development commissioner, Punjab accepted the whole ship of seeds and asked us to sow them. This seed needed chemical fertilisers, which required heavy watering. Cheap credit was required. All this was done through the cooperative banks. In 1968, we had a harvest we could not imagine. All schools and other rural infrastructure were shut down and used as godowns. The entire sowing area was rapidly brought under the new seeds; credit and fertiliser arrangements were made, and Punjab created the green revolution in wheat. No one else did. The country gained self-sufficiency and true independence. Incomes went up rapidly. In the 1970s, high-yielding seeds of paddy were brought from Los Banos in the Philippines. Soon, Punjab was producing a record harvest of paddy. Until then, we neither grew paddy nor ate rice. It is a matter of record that since then, Punjab has been giving 60%–70% of the grain needed to feed the vast deficit areas of the country. With cooperative loans, we soon had 8–10 lakh of shallow tube wells. These supplemented the canal waters. Today, 14 lakh tube wells provide the main irrigation; canal water is a small percentage. But now the water table has receded and the tube wells are facing a crisis.

But what is the price of the green revolution success? Environmental considerations were not known in the 1960s. Punjab's only assets—alluvial soil, sweet water at a shallow depth, and a progressive farmer—were exploited to the full. Fertilisers and pesticides began to be used very heavily. Today, the soil is over-used, the groundwater has receded to a great depth, and is constantly diminishing further. The pesticides and fertilisers have poisoned the water. Punjab has paid a heavy price. I remember a meeting during the 1970s, with the Planning Commission member for agriculture, who had been agriculture secretary of India. I was arguing for programmes of cotton in the southern districts around Bhatinda. He straightaway objected, saying the centre needed

the grain. I argued back, should not the Punjab farmer also take his economic decisions for his best gain, as do the industrialists of India. Many decades later, Sharad Pawar, agriculture minister under Manmohan Singh, went to Chandigarh, and brutally told the Punjab government, that they did not need the state's grain any longer. He said that Punjab should think of growing alternative crops. This is because the other states had increased their grain output; what is more, the centre was proud of its \$300 billion-plus reserve and could always import. In the last two years, the centre is steadily reducing its procurement of grain in Punjab. So the state today finds itself without alternatives, help or sympathy.

The wheel has come full circle, I am here  
—King Lear.

### Water Situation

In this agriculture story is embedded the fate of the Punjab rivers. The Indus treaty of 1960 gave the Sutlej, Beas and Ravi rivers to our Punjab. Punjab engineers built the great Bhakra dam. In 1955, the Government of India on its own decided that 8 million acre feet (MAF) of the Punjab waters will be given free to Rajasthan, not a riparian state. The final treaty gave East Punjab 15.8 MAF. Of this, 0.2 MAF was given to Delhi and 0.6 MAF to Jammu, as they have rights over the Ravi. In 1966, the reduced Punjab was left with 7 MAF. In 1976, the 7 MAF was divided half-and-half between Punjab and Haryana. While Haryana is to get Ravi waters, the river being next to Lahore, Punjab is not given any share in the Jamuna waters, although the pre-1966 border of united Punjab was up to the Jamuna. In a very quiet division made in the Government of India, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and even Rajasthan shared the Jamuna. Fifty years after the division, the riparian state, sole owner of the Punjab rivers, is left with 3.5 MAF only for itself.

The passage of time and multiple court orders have left this situation tied in judicial knots. In all these 50 years, the new Punjab has lived with this Damocles sword hanging over its head. The management of the Bhakra dam,

too, has been taken under central control. At one stage, they wanted to even take over the Ropar and Ferozepur head works, but Saner Counsels prevailed. Whatever the future may bring, I can only say that the world is full of river water disputes. So is India. These cannot be solved by court orders, given within a narrow judicial vision. They are best solved by discussion and fairness to all, most of all, the owner state.

At independence, Punjab became a border state, and the continuing Kashmir problem was an excuse against locating any industry in Punjab. The Soviet-style Planning Commission and the lack of any political strength in Delhi ensured that Punjab was never allocated any industry. Naturally, textiles from Amritsar, the Batala foundry industry and other little units all drifted out. The Vajpayee government struck another blow by giving special tax concessions to the hill states. Very soon, the little industry that was left shifted across the border into Himachal Pradesh. Even the rice shellers went away, although the crop is in Punjab; and it can hardly be counted as an industry. When the United Progressive Alliance came, I argued hard once with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh against the injustice. He admitted with some irritation and frustration: if we remove the concession then we will lose votes in Himachal Pradesh!

Fifty years after the second partition of Punjab, I see the farmers with their backs to the wall. The holdings are less than two acres, the soil is overused, and the groundwater is poisoned and diminishing. In the Punjab Agricultural University, I had said in a convocation address in 1998, "The Punjab, as claimed, is not a great agriculture state. It is only a grain-growing factory." I warned the gathering of professors and students, "Remember, factories have lockouts. I think you are about to have one." Sadly, 18 years later, my words ring true. There is no industry in Punjab. Unemployment is rampant. Frustrated youth are said to be taking to drugs. All this will lead to a crisis difficult to face and resolve. Punjab today is like Vesuvius, silent but simmering.