

RGICS



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EMERGING FAULT-LINES IN PUNJAB

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Introduction:

The past few years have seen Punjab in a state of turmoil. Its ruling party, the Shiromani Akali Dal (and the Badal family) have been dogged by accusations of widespread corruption and blind indifference towards issues plaguing the state. The current furore over the Sutlej-Yamuna Link Canal is the most recent indication of Punjab's agricultural and water crisis. Punjab's drug epidemic has hit worldwide headlines, but is still refuted by the ruling political establishment. Widespread unemployment has led to its youth turning to illegal migration in search of better prospects. Despite Dalits forming a significant portion of the population, their issues have remained largely ignored. In the last year, the state was hit by two terror attacks that exposed the laxity of security measures on the border that it shares with Pakistan. A general sense of dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs has fuelled the rise of politically powerful godmen who offer quick fixes to intractable problems; and the drumming up of pro-Khalistan sentiments by political opportunists ahead of the upcoming elections.

Major Issues:

I. Agricultural Distress:

- **Falling prices of Basmati**
- **Cotton crop loss**
- **Irrigation**
- **Non-payment of state compensation**
- **High input costs**

Punjab is facing an acute agrarian distress, with virtually no recourse for farmers due to non-payment of insurance and state compensation. Although Punjab is relatively better-irrigated than other states, it is suffering the effects of a poor monsoon for the first time.

Moreover, Punjab has also had to deal with the additional problems of falling commodity prices and crop destruction by pests. Cotton growers lost 40% of their standing kharif crop to attacks by the whitefly, losing acres in a matter of days. Yields are now expected to fall by half.ⁱ This has also raised the question of the efficacy of Bt Cotton, a genetically modified variety which was promoted as pest-resistant.ⁱⁱ

Basmati rice, which is one of the main crops of Punjab, has also been hit by a fall in global commodity rates, resulting in farmers having to sell their rice at the rate for which it is being sold at ration shops.ⁱⁱⁱ The government has failed to procure rice and wheat from farmers at MSP.^{iv}

A possible reason behind the current crisis is the heavy dependence of Punjab's agriculture on high cost seeds and chemicals, which lead to debt creation. Moreover, chemical agriculture is water intensive, and destroys soil fertility and its capacity to hold water.^v

As a result of the ongoing agrarian crisis, **Punjab has the 2nd highest farmer suicide rate in the country**. MoS for Agriculture Mohanbhai Kundariya submitted in Parliament that 449 farmers committed suicide in Punjab in 2015.^{vi}

The present situation prompted Punjab CM Parkash Singh Badal, currently facing a backlash from farmers, to address a strongly-worded letter to the Prime Minister urging him to bail out the farming community in Punjab. Cornering the Centre over outstanding payments, Badal pointed out that as per estimates by the Centre itself, Rs 52,438 crore from banks were outstanding towards farmers in March, 2013 ie Rs 38,700 crore from public sector banks and Rs 13,738 crore from cooperative banks. The Chief Minister said it was most urgent to provide a one-time loan waiver to small and marginal farmers and agricultural labourers. "As a matter of fact, the problem can be neglected only at the risk of playing

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havoc with the future of our national economy, completely endangering the country's food security in the long run," he added.^{vii}

II. Water Redistribution and the Sutlej-Yamuna Link Canal:

- **The State Government has resolved that the SYL Canal will not be built, in defiance of a Supreme Court order**
- **Punjab is facing an acute water shortage and a rapidly falling water table**
- **Any move in support of the SYL Canal will be perceived as anti-farmer**
- **Although the Centre claims that remains neutral on the issue, its political ally in Punjab is in vehement opposition**

The Punjab State Assembly recently defied the Supreme Court and resolved that the Sutlej-Yamuna Link Canal (SYL) will not be built. It passed the Punjab Sutlej-Yamuna Link Land (Return of Property Rights) Bill, 2016, which denies Haryana its allotted share of the waters of the Ravi and Beas rivers, renegeing on a deal dating back to 1976.^{viii}

The SYL has been a controversial political issue since the days of the Khalistan movement. Water-intensive rice crops cover over 60% of the Punjab's cultivated area. Thus, any move to honour the SYL agreement would immediately be regarded as anti-farmer.

Moreover, while the central government claimed that remained neutral and could not take a stand on construction of the canal^{ix}, in Punjab it is in alliance with the Shiromani Akali Dal, which opposes it. The Congress in Punjab has criticised the present government for failing to stall construction of the canal; however its counterpart in Haryana demands that construction continues.

However, the actual issue of acute water crisis and a rapidly falling water table^x being faced by the state remains ignored.

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III. Dalit Issues:

- **Despite constituting 32% of the electorate, Dalits have relatively low political representation**
- **Dalit issues are still largely ignored by the State**
- **Denied access to land that they are entitled to by law**
- **Educational facilities are inadequate**
- **Punjab has one of the highest numbers of Manual Scavengers in the country**
- **Rise in Dalit atrocities**

Despite Dalits constituting 32% of the electorate in Punjab – the highest percentage of any state in India – they are politically under-represented, resulting in their issues remaining largely unaddressed. Its Chief Ministers have mostly been from the Jat community.^{xi} Only 34 out of 117 seats in the Vidhan Sabha are currently occupied by members of the Scheduled Caste.^{xii} The ruling Akali Dal has even been attacked by its own ally, the BJP, for allegedly diverting funds released for various Dalit welfare schemes in the state.^{xiii}

Dalits own only 2.3% of land in Punjab, with most of them being landless as a result. They work mostly as agricultural labour or cultivate common land in villages.^{xiv} Although The Punjab Village Common Lands (Regulation) Act, 1961 decrees that all panchayats must mandatorily reserve 33% of available shamlat or common land for lease to Scheduled Castes, this provision has been exploited by upper caste villagers who host dummy SC claimants to deprive Dalit families of their rightful share of the land. However, Dalit collectives across the state are slowly and successfully wresting their rightful claim from the hands of upper castes despite a brutal crackdown by the police and the political establishment.^{xv} The lack of educational facilities available to Dalits has been a hurdle to their progress. The education of economically weaker Dalit children is limited to government schools that are understaffed and lack adequate infrastructure. Despite the Right to Education Act making it mandatory for private aided schools to educate at least 25% of children from economically weaker sections, the Act is poorly implemented.^{xvi}

While Punjab previously denied the existence of manual scavenging in the state^{xvii}, the 2011 Socio-Economic and Caste Census^{xviii} showed that it had 11,949 manual scavengers, one of the highest numbers in the country.^{xix} However, the Survey on Manual Scavengers in Statutory Towns, which seeks to identify persons engaged in manual scavenging, shows that Punjab has only 91 manual scavengers in the areas covered under the survey as of 4th April, 2016.^{xx} A recent RTI enquiry revealed that 20 persons died cleaning sewers in Ludhiana, Amritsar, Jalandhar, Patiala and Barnala in the last decade.^{xxi}

Atrocities against Dalits have witnessed a rise over the past few years. In May 2015, a minor girl was killed when she was thrown off and then run over by a bus after being molested by the conductor and helper. The bus was run by a company owned by the Badals, who washed their hands off the incident.^{xxii} Last December, two Dalit men had their limbs hacked off at the home of an Akali leader, one of whom later succumbed to his injuries.^{xxiii} The SAD-BJP coalition was attacked by the opposition, with Mayawati condemning its “inability” to prevent atrocities on Dalits. The incidents were both “painful and shameful”, she said, blaming the liquor mafia for the Abohar incident where the limbs of a Dalit worker were chopped off “as part of a conspiracy”.^{xxiv}

IV. Youth Unemployment:

- **Punjab no longer a manufacturing hub due to a hostile business environment**
- **Qualified youth are leaving Punjab due to a lack of opportunities**
- **The government has failed to address the issue, only handing out voter-friendly sops instead**
- **Increasing drug abuse by the youth is both a reason for, and an outcome of, youth unemployment**

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Over the past ten years, particularly since 2010, Punjab has lost its status as a hub of industry due to a combination of rising operation costs and the state government's disinclination towards creating a business environment to offset these conditions. Meanwhile, the cost of doing business in Punjab continues to rise.^{xxv} An inevitable outcome is a lack of employment opportunities, which has hit Punjab's youth the hardest.

Qualified youth are fleeing Punjab due to a lack of employment opportunities, both in the agricultural and industrial sectors. Many youth are forced to resort to illegal emigration to far-flung countries with the aid of unscrupulous touts; many of them are never heard from again by their families.

The problem of youth unemployment has been recognised by both the government and opposition parties. However, the government seems unwilling to attack the issue head on. In its recent Budget, the government has made an attempt to help young entrepreneurs through schemes that remove the hurdles faced by start-ups and micro, small and medium enterprises, in addition to opening up 200 skill development centres for rural youth. Finance Minister Parminder Dhindsa has allotted Rs. 500 crore for youth-centric schemes. However, a closer look shows that Rs. 200 crore will be used to set up gymnasiums across the state, while a further Rs. 75 crore was allotted to distribute free sports kits among budding players.^{xxvi}

The government's proposed scheme to provide a Rs. 1000 allowance per month for unemployed youth has been criticised by opposition parties such as the AAP, who claim that the government has ignored an important cause (and outcome) of youth unemployment, which is the drug epidemic that Punjab is currently facing.^{xxvii}

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V. Drug Epidemic:

- **2nd highest number of cases under the NDPS Act in 2014 (30% of cases nationwide)**
- **No concrete figures for incidence of drug and narcotic addiction – could be as high as 75%**
- **Government refuses to acknowledge the gravity of the issue**
- **Various drugs and narcotics are freely available, including over-the-counter pharmaceuticals**

Drug abuse has an adverse and far-reaching impact on a large section of the population in Punjab, both directly and indirectly.

Punjab accounted for the second-highest number of cases registered under the NDPS Act in 2014 (around 30% of cases nation-wide).^{xxviii} While different studies have been conducted into how many people are addicted to drugs and other narcotic substances, actual figures vary. Punjab's Department of Social Security Development of Women and Children reports that the rate of heroin abuse among the youth in Punjab's border belt is as high as 75%, whereas in rural areas the figure hovers around 73%. 67% of rural households have at least one addict in the family, and each week sees at least one death in the region due to a drug overdose.^{xxix} However, at an event in Delhi a few months ago, Deputy Chief Minister Sukhbir Badal claimed that only 0.7% of the state's youth were drug users.^{xxx}

As of 2015, the rate of HIV infection amongst drug users in Punjab was as high as 21.10%, due to the high number of Injectable Drug Users in the state.^{xxxi}

In light of the shockingly high rate of youth who have either experimented with narcotics or are addicted to them^{xxxii}, the government aggressively needs to target this particularly vulnerable demographic in its war on drugs.

While the government claims that it has set up resources for drug addicts, access to these resources is limited. For example, on June 3rd, 2014 the government had claimed that drug de-addiction centres across the state would provide free treatment. However, the government ended the free medicine scheme just months later, with reports that free de-addiction medicines were actually made available for only a fortnight. Moreover, these centres are short-staffed and have been facing numerous resignations.^{xxxiii}

Punjab has a vast number of chemist stores, even in areas that often do not have qualified doctors. These chemists, often unlicensed, offer cheap and easy access to pharmaceuticals and synthetic drugs that are then abused illegally. These drugs often do not require a prescription, or are issued without providing a prescription. The Border Security Force, in its report to the Home Ministry, recently reported that synthetic drugs are freely available in border areas of Punjab and can be purchased from chemists or local vendors.^{xxxiv}

Moreover, the narcotic drugs provided by the government as raw material to pharmaceutical companies often finds their way into the open market, according to officials from the Narcotics Control Bureau.^{xxxv} This highlights the immediate need for stringent checks and accountability throughout the entire process of manufacturing medicines from these raw materials.

The present political establishment in Punjab has blamed the drug problem in large part to “narco-terrorism” by enemies of the state.^{xxxvi} While India has traditionally been, and continues to be, a hub for drugs from Afghanistan and Pakistan, this is a complete denial of the culpability of the government in ignoring the thriving local criminal network that is ensuring the manufacture, supply and distribution of these drugs, which throws suspicion on a possible nexus with persons in positions of power.

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VI. Illegal Migration and Human Trafficking:

- **Punjab is a hub for licensed and unlicensed visa agencies**
- **People desperate to leave Punjab are often hoodwinked by unscrupulous agents**
- **Many agencies are part of a larger trafficking network**

Illegal migration and trafficking has been a major problem in Punjab for years, and is largely to do with not only the search for better prospects and the dream of a better life, but also the prestige that society bestows on those who have a relative working abroad. As a result, Punjab is a hub for both licensed and unlicensed visa agencies that lure people desperate to migrate to other countries, and which often operate within grey areas of the law. A 2010 UN Report stated that over 20,000 Punjabi youth attempt to illegally migrate every year.^{xxxvii}

Very often, these visa agencies dupe unsuspecting applicants by charging vast sums of money, all payable in cash, and also seizing important documents such as passports. These documents can be held hostage to ensure payment of more money than initially quoted, and the fact that all payments were made in cash ensures that there is no proof of payment. Moreover, in such cases, the police simply treat these as cases of fraud, and the agents get off scot-free due to lack of evidence as well as their powerful connections. Many of these agencies are a part of large-scale criminal trafficking rings.^{xxxviii}

Since most of these agencies do not employ legal routes, applicants are often taken to far-off countries, where relatives often never hear from them again and have no way of knowing whether they are alive or dead. Presently, there is no recourse available to them or their families.^{xxxix}

39 men from Punjab working at construction sites in Iraq were captured by the IS in June 2014. Although a few nurses from Kerala and Tamil Nadu were also captured by the IS a few days later, they were safely released 48 hours later due to sustained efforts by the government.^{xl} However, almost 2 years later, there has still been no progress with regard to the return of the 39 construction workers.

The marked lack of involvement of the Indian security establishment in securing the return of the hostages is significant, as the Ministry of External Affairs seems to be trying to handle the issue solely through a senior diplomat in Iraq^{xli}, and Sushma Swaraj's visits to the region.^{xlii}

Ms. Swaraj recently told the families of the hostages that she was told by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas that the "Indians are alive and made to work" in Iraq as per his government's intelligence.^{xliii} She assured the families that the government was "fully and continuously engaged" and "every possible effort" was being made to ensure their release.^{xliiv} However, India has little diplomatic presence in Iraq. In addition, the captors have demanded no ransom, and India has no prisoners that it can swap for the safe return of its citizens.^{xlv}

VII. Gun Ownership:

- **Punjab accounts for 2.3% of the national population and owns 20% of its licensed weapons**
- **Rise in inter-state arms smuggling and licensing rackets**
- **High numbers of cases registered under the Arms Act and persons murdered from gun violence**

While Punjab constitutes 2.3% of the national population, it owns nearly 20% of the licensed weapons in the country. In his recent advisory note to the state government, Punjab traffic advisor Navdeep Asija pointed out that 4.5 lakh licenses (each allowing 3 firearms on a single license) had been issued to civilians, resulting in an estimated 11 lakh firearms against approximately 77,000 police personnel. Even if each police officer is estimated to have one firearm, the state police own just 7% of the total private licensed firearms in Punjab.^{xlvi}

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Punjab's strong gun culture and the consequent rise in demand for arms has also fuelled inter-state arms smuggling and licensing rackets. The city of Ferozepur is the site of hundreds of such raids, and even local politicians have been found to be involved in this activity. Moreover, the CBI had reportedly recovered 12,000 fake arms licenses a few years ago from all over the country, all of which were issued in Ferozepur.^{xlvii}

Punjab has the dubious distinction of having the 5th highest number of cases registered under the Arms Act, as well as the having the 5th highest number of persons murdered from gun violence, according to data from the National Crime Records Bureau.^{xlviii}

VIII. Porous Borders and Terror Attacks:

- **Recent terror attacks exploited porous borders and lax security**
- **Increasing evidence of a nexus between local drug cartels, Indian security officials and Pakistani terror groups**
- **Porous border traditionally facilitated trans-national drugs trade, now increasingly facilitating terrorism**

The terror attacks on Gurdaspur in 2015 and Pathankot in 2016 took advantage of porous borders and lax security. However, there is mounting evidence of a nexus between local drug cartels, Indian security officials and Pakistani terror groups that provided intelligence and safe passage to the terrorists, therefore ensuring the success of these incursions. Although multiple sources seem to indicate that this nexus is being investigated both in Gurdaspur^{xlix, 1} and Pathankotⁱⁱ, there has been no official confirmation so far.

Senior Punjab Police officer Salwinder Singh, who was under investigation for a possible link with the Pathankot airbase attackers, was subsequently given a clean chit by the National Investigation Agency. The Superintendent of Police-rank officer was subjected to several rounds of questioning, along with a lie-detector test. According to the report, the investigative agency found nothing adverse against him following its examination.ⁱⁱⁱ

An alleged ISI agent was recently arrested by the Punjab Police in Pathankot. He was reportedly working as a labourer inside the Mamoon Army Cantonment. The accused was allegedly promised Rs. 50,000 to capture pictures of buildings inside the campus that had distinguishable markings.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Several photos of sensitive locations were found on his phone by investigators. The Mamoon Army Cantonment is one of the army's most important military bases in Pathankot.^{liv}

Punjab's porous border, which has traditionally facilitated a thriving trans-national drug trade, has now also become a facilitator for terrorism in the region. Concerns over repeated border intrusions and terrorist attacks have finally prompted the government to take concrete steps to address the present security lacunae. 41 points that have been identified on the international border of Punjab will now be covered by a laser wall on priority in order to eliminate chances of human error that might allow cross-border infiltration.^{lv}

The Ministry of Home Affairs has also set up a committee that has been mandated to physically inspect border fencing along the entire India-Pakistan border in Punjab and check for vulnerable spots.^{lvi}

IX. Militancy:

- **Fear of increasing pro-Khalistan sentiments**
- **Politicians suspected to be fanning these flames in the wake of upcoming elections**

A decade-long period of militancy in the 1980s ensured that Punjab suffered heavy losses, both financial and social. Although the Khalistan movement splintered and faded away by the mid-1990s, recent developments have given rise to a fear of increasing pro-Khalistani sentiments, with recent claims that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) was being funded by Khalistan supporters living abroad.^{lvii}

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In March 2012, separatists shut down Punjab to demand the release of Balwant Singh Rajoana, a Babbar Khalsa International terrorist facing the death sentence for the assassination of then chief minister Beant Singh. During the bandh, posters of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, and Khalistani flags resurfaced in several parts of Punjab.

In October 2015, several incidents of desecration of Guru Granth Sahib raised communal tensions throughout and beyond Punjab, leading to widespread protests and police firing that eventually led to the removal of the Punjab DGP.

At last year's convening of the Sarbat Khalsa – the 18th century tradition of gathering sarbat (all) khalsa (Sikhs) for important political discussions, participants demanded Khalistan and anointed Beant Singh's assassin Jagtar Singh Hawara jathedar of Akal Takht. President of the Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar) Simranjit Singh Mann, one of the organisers of the Sarbat Khalsa, says the hardliners are ready to bring Khalistan back to the centrestage. "We will intensify our stir. We will organise bandhs," he says.^{lviii}

Defence experts say that there is a very low chance of a Khalistan movement originating in Punjab.^{lix} Harpal Singh Cheema, who has spent his life fighting for a separate Sikh state, claims that although the fight continues, there is no chance of militancy returning to Punjab.^{lx}

However, in the wake of upcoming elections, there are increasing concerns about politicians fanning the flames of the separatist movement in order to divert public attention away from larger issues affecting Punjab such as rampant drug abuse, corruption, and agrarian and water crises.

X. Healthcare:

- **Low per capita expenditure on healthcare by the government**
- **Disproportionate allocation of funds to fight cancer although mortality is below the national average**
- **Budget cuts have led to hospitals being severely understaffed**

Per capita government expenditure on health is extremely low. According to the National Sample Survey Office, households in Punjab bear the highest out-of-pocket expenditure on healthcare in the country – Rs. 28,539 against the national average of Rs. 18,628; a whopping Rs. 10,000 above the national average.

The 2015 National Health Profile has a per capita expenditure of Rs. 728 on healthcare, which is half that of the neighbouring state of Himachal Pradesh. Moreover, due to the state's disproportionate allocation of funds to fight cancer (despite the fact that cancer mortality in Punjab is below the national average), actual healthcare expenditure is even lower.

Budget cuts have led to healthcare in Punjab being affected in numerous ways. Due to the insufficiency of funds available, the state is unable to pay market salaries, making it difficult to fill several critical posts in its hospitals. Laxmi Kanta Chawla, health minister of Punjab between 2007 and 2011, says, "In the government setup, there is no capacity to perform brain, heart or kidney operations". She continues, "These are available only in the private ones." This paucity extends to even routine positions. Jagjit Cheema, who retired as joint secretary from the Punjab health department in 2014 says, "The state doesn't have enough medical specialists, gynaecologists, paediatricians, eye surgeons, ENTs, radiologists, orthos. That is where we stand today." The shortages are so acute that they do not result merely in poor care – on occasion, they result in denial of care itself.

The National Health Profile, 2015 shows that Punjab has just 3,121 doctors in the government health system to serve a population of 2.77 crore, or one doctor for every 9,153 persons. These numbers compare unfavourably with neighbouring states such as Himachal Pradesh (1,419) and Jammu and Kashmir (3,386). The World Health Organization norm is 1:1,000.

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Meanwhile, with most of the available money going into salaries, there is underfunding in other sections. There is no regular supply of medicines or reagents. At the same time, government hospitals that have not received funds for staff salaries from the state have to charge the patients in order to make up the deficit. This results in patients who cannot afford private care having to pay for drugs, diagnostic tests and procedures even in government hospitals.^{lx}

Conclusion:

Although the present scenario seems grim, public anger and the imminent elections have finally caused the government to attempt to remedy the situation. However, a strong anti-incumbency wave may give the opposition an edge in the upcoming polls. Punjab has a long road ahead in addressing its deep-seated problems, but history has repeatedly shown that it is capable of recovering from even the most daunting setbacks and moving steadfastly forward.

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