

Electoral Politics in Post-Conflict States: The Case of Punjab

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Introduction

A study of the patterns of electoral mobilisation in Punjab in the 1990s and in the first years of the twenty first century is, we consider, important for two reasons. It helps us to understand the dynamics of state politics in India, and it helps to throw light on a rather significant research question: *what does electoral politics in post-conflict societies look like?* The question is of some import considering that 'normalcy' was restored to the state *without a single demand of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution being met*. That is the Akali Dal, which had set out to confront the central government in and through the adoption of the Resolution, had *not* achieved any of the objectives laid out in the resolution, least of all the objective of recasting centre-state relations¹. In effect, the Resolution which inaugurated the centre-state conflict in the late 1970s, and which gave an initial boost to militancy, may well never have happened. On the other hand, the Congress which controlled the central government for much of the period of militancy was largely identified as the very party that had sanctioned the use of massive force to suppress militancy. It was also identified in the popular eye as the party whose leaders had directed the anti-Sikh pogrom in Delhi after the assassination of P.M. Indira Gandhi in 1984. But in 1992 this very Congress had to face the electorate of Punjab as an aspirant for power.

It is also a fact that a substantial section of opinion in the state holds political parties as responsible for visiting violence on the heads of Punjabi's in the first instance. According to the findings of our survey which was conducted earlier this year in Amritsar district of Punjab, 26 percent of the respondents feel that political parties were responsible in some way or the other for the outbreak of conflict. 86 percent of the respondents who blamed political parties opined that the conflict was due to the fact that no party ever addressed the issue of basic needs, and 43.5 percent believed that the outbreak of the conflict had a lot to do with these parties being corrupt².

Both parties had therefore to reinvent agendas, recast their images, and re-seek legitimacy if they wished to win the elections. Expectedly both the AD and the Congress were to resort to the politically vague and amorphous rhetoric of peace, fighting corruption, and 'healing hearts and minds'. For after all a state and a people that had been torn asunder under the onslaught of militants as well as the onslaught of the security forces; a state and a people that had been living under the shadow of the gun for over twelve years, had to be coaxed into

¹ Since successive governments in the centre paid little heed to the core demand of the Resolution, a third force had erupted in the state by the late 1970s. This third force was constituted by the militants. The militants faced by a recalcitrant central government on the one hand, and a political party that seemed incapable of safeguarding the autonomy of the state on the other, turned their back upon democratic institutions and resorted to the use of the gun. From 1980 to 1992 Punjab was wracked by violence, suspension of normal democratic activity, and suppression of democratic rights. Militancy was to lead to the assassination of one Prime Minister and the anti-Sikh riots which followed the assassination were to lead to thousands of deaths of innocent Sikhs. The riots also rendered thousand of Sikhs shelterless as their homes and their properties were burnt by marauding hordes in November 1984.

² Preliminary Data Findings of the project '*Conflict and Institutional Change in India*' conducted by research scholars of dcrc for the Crisis States Programme. Amritsar was categorized by the Government of India as the highest conflict area in the state.

accepting the two parties as legitimate. Since both the AD and the Congress were pre-occupied with their respective quests for legitimacy, it is not surprising that crucial issues which had begun to impact the lives of the people by the beginning of the decade of the 1990s were put onto the back burner of political agendas. The foremost issue—that of the agrarian crisis which threatened to disrupt lives and livelihoods and which continues to do so—was simply *not* addressed in any of the three elections that followed the containment of militancy in the state in 1992, 1997, and 2002.

Certainly formal democratic politics is not enough to ensure that governments will address or negotiate pressing political, economic, and social problems. Any government, however democratic be the ways in which it has been elected into power, has to be pressurised into doing so by groups in civil society. But the peasant movement in Punjab beset as it is by its own contradictions and weaknesses has simply failed to represent the needs of the peasantry. Neither has it been able to ensure the production of appropriate policies that might serve to resolve the problem.

In short, the agrarian crisis has neither been reflected in nor set the terms of debate for electoral and political processes in the state. Resultantly, we find a marked dissonance between political economy and political processes in Punjab, with the former hardly influencing the latter. This is somewhat worrying because since the 1990s it has become clear that agriculture, which is the mainstay of the Punjab economy, is in serious trouble. And the predicament of the agrarian sector continues to mount even as the main political parties in the state continue to talk past the needs of the rural population.

This essay maps out the disjunction between the political economy of a state which at one point of time was touted as a model for the rest of the country; and political and electoral process. The argument proceeds in three sections: in the first part it explores the dynamics of the agrarian crisis of the state, in the second part we examine the main issues that formed the core of electoral mobilisation, and in the third section we suggest that the answer to the question of why there is a disjunction between political economy and electoral politics in Punjab, can be found both in the weakness of party politics and in the weakness of the peasant movement in the state.

I

The Political Economy of Punjab

That the technologies of the green revolution had sparked off robust agricultural growth in Punjab is more than clear when we consider that militancy hardly affected agricultural production in the state. During the highest phase of militancy that is from 1980 to 1992, we do not find any negative correlation between conflict and agricultural performance³. Amritsar and Gurdaspur in the Majha region, Ludhiana in the Malwa region, and Jullunder in the Doaba region all of which were high conflict areas, actually performed better than low conflict areas⁴. For instance paddy production in Amritsar which was categorised as the highest

³ Militancy adversely affected real estate and the service sector to some extent.

⁴ Our project 'Conflict and Institutional Change in India' mapped out high conflict areas and low conflict areas in the state from 1980-1994 on the basis of three indicators in the Crime Report Statistics published by the Government of India—murders, kidnappings, and riots. The three criteria were chosen as the basis of identification for one main reason. All cases of 'terrorism' during the conflict were filed under three categories of murders, kidnappings, and riots. There is no separate category for 'terrorist' acts in the records. This is corroborated by our finding that the incidence of murders, kidnappings and riots went up phenomenally during the phase of the conflict. The high

conflict area in the state was lower to that of a low conflict district like Patiala in 1980, 615 metric tonnes per annum for the former and 793 metric tonnes per annum for the latter. By 1995 paddy production in Amritsar had increased compared to Patiala, the figure being 1381 metric tonnes per annum for the former and 1224 metric tonnes per annum for the latter. Similarly, wheat production in Amritsar district was 821 metric tones in 1980, compared to Patiala which produced 867 metric tones of wheat. But by 1995 the relevant figures are 1476 for Punjab and 1075 for Patiala⁵.

It is because of this robust agricultural growth which was sparked off in the second half of the 1960s that Punjab came to be generally seen as a model state, as the granary of India, and as the locus of individual entrepreneurship, sheer grit and fortitude. This is more than remarkable when we recollect that the partition of Punjab in 1947 had irremediably scarred collective life in the region. The entire Hindu and Sikh population migrated from West to East Punjab, and almost the entire Muslim community migrated to West Punjab amidst intense communal strife, rioting, and widespread killings. It is estimated that about three hundred thousand people were killed even as 8.6 million people migrated from one part of the region to another. Moreover, since 70 percent of the rich agricultural economy of the canal colonies was transferred to Pakistan, Indian Punjab was turned into a food-deficit province. And as Hindus and the Sikhs returned to East Punjab from where they had migrated to the canal colonies in the latter half of the nineteenth century, population pressures on the land soared.

However, by the 1950s, agricultural production in Punjab had revived largely as a result of the adoption of rather prudent policies of land reform, compensation for property left behind in West Punjab, land consolidation and land ceiling. But it was the introduction of the package of high yielding variety of seeds, irrigation, fertiliser, and pesticides that generated an agrarian revolution, the likes of which were just not seen in the rest of the country. By 1997 the state had achieved an irrigation cover of 94 percent of the cropped area, a cropping intensity of 186 percent as compared to 133 percent in the rest of the country, and 98 percent HYV coverage which is highest among the Indian states. Agriculture in Punjab is a highly capital intensive and mechanized enterprise, with the state possessing 9.35,000 energised tube wells and 9.35 lakh tractors or 18 percent of total number of tractors in the country⁶. In fact every third farming household in the state owns a tractor. The consumption of electricity in the state is the highest in the country, and the consumption of fertilizer in Punjab is 184 kg per hectare compared to an average of 70 kilogram per hectare in other states. The state tops the country in terms of per capita milk consumption and incidentally in liquor consumption as well. The output of food grains rose almost four times in three decades- from 73 lakh tones in 1970-71 to 253 lakh tones in 1999-2000. The area under wheat increased 2.1 times and production of wheat increased 6.3 times in the period 1966-67 to 2000-01. The area under rice increased in the same period seven times, and rice yields increased two times from 1970-71 to 2000-01⁷. Today the state produces over eight tonnes per hectare of wheat and rice⁸. In 2004 Punjab contributed 40 percent of wheat and 60 percent of

conflict areas were Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Ludhiana, Jullunder, Ferozepur, Sangrur in only 1992. Low conflict areas were Sangrur except 1992, Kapurthala, Roper, Hoshiarpur, Mansa, and Patiala.

⁵ These statistics have been generated by our project

⁶ *Punjab Development Report 2004*, Planning Commission, Delhi, Government of India, chapter 4, henceforth PDR.

⁷ PDR, pp 12-25

⁸ ibid, pg v

rice to the central pool⁹ and produced a surplus of cotton and sugarcane. It is this that has given Punjab the status of the 'bread basket' of the country.

More importantly, the green revolution dramatically transformed lives and livelihoods in the state, because it ensured that Punjab became one of the most affluent states in the country. Right up to the end of the 1990s Punjab has been ranked first among all the states in terms of per capita income. In 1966-67 per capita income in the state was Rs, 1791, in 1976-7 it rose to Rs 2388, to further rise to Rs 3302 in 1986-7 and to Rs 3750 in 1989-90. After 1990 when liberalisation was introduced in India, Maharashtra and Gujarat overtook the state in terms of per capita income. The rate of growth of per capita income in Punjab in the decade of the 1990s was 2.8 percent per annum compared to 7.6 percent per annum for Gujarat, and 6.1 percent per annum in Maharashtra. But even though Punjab's status in per capita income went down to fourth rank in this period, its per capita income remains one of the highest in the country standing at Rs 4791 in 2000-01¹⁰. At present only two states-Goa and J and K-have poverty levels lower than that of Punjab, only about 6 percent of the rural and urban population is below the poverty line, and life expectancy in the state is the second highest in the country that is after Kerala for both men and women¹¹.

But it is also true that Punjab is characterised by severe regional imbalances both in terms of economic growth and in terms of human development indicators. In Mansa district of South Punjab the literacy level is only slightly higher than that of Bihar, and infant mortality in the district is comparable to Rajasthan. Human development indicators are worrying in other fields as well. A food surplus state like Punjab has large numbers of anaemic children, a shocking rate of female foeticide resulting in a gender ratio which is far lower than that of the rest of country- 793 females per 1000 males, and a high rate of unemployment among educated youth. The Scheduled Castes are worse off. Female literacy is only 31 percent among the SC's, and very few of this community own land. Though the SCs comprise 28 percent of the population in the state, they only hold one tenth of the land.

By the 1980s the green revolution had run its course and Punjab agriculture entered into a structural crisis. This has resulted in heightened rates of out-migration, farmer's suicides, high rates of indebtedness, and an ecological crisis of considerable magnitude. The question is: how did this sorry state of affairs come to pass? For in the first phase of the green revolution from 1965-66 to 1975-76, economic growth in Punjab outpaced that of the rest of the country. The economy grew at the rate of 4.8 percent per year compared to the 3.5 percent per year growth rate of the national economy. In the second phase that is from 1980-81 to 1990-91, Punjab's economy grew at 5.3 percent, but the national economy grew in the same period at 5.5 percent per annum. And the neighbouring states of Haryana and Rajasthan grew at 6.4 percent and 6.6 percent per annum respectively. In the third phase that is from 1991-97, the economy of Punjab began to slow down with the rate of growth reduced to 4.1 percent per annum at a time when the economy of Gujarat was growing at 9.6 percent per

⁹ *ibid*, pg 1

¹⁰ *ibid*, pg 582

¹¹ See F James Levinson, Sucheta Mehra, Dorothy Levinson, Anita Kumari Chauhan, Aster M Almedom, 203, 'Nutritional Well-Being and Gender Differences: After 30 Years of Rapid Growth in Rural Punjab' *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 9-15, vol xxxviii, no 32, pp 3340-3341. However Punjab lags behind Kerala, Maharastra, and West Bengal in literacy, and lags behind the rest of the country in gender ratios.

year, that of Maharashtra by 8 percent per year, and that of the country 6.89 per annum¹². The agricultural sector in Punjab was greatly hit and agricultural growth declined from 5.15 percent per year in the decade of the 1980s to 2.16 percent per annum in the period 1991-98. If we further segregate the agricultural sector into agriculture and livestock, agriculture recorded a minimal growth rate of 0.37 percent per annum in 1991-1998. This compares unfavourably to the growth rate of 4.87 percent per annum in the 1980s. Over the years the share of the agricultural sector in the State Domestic Product has declined from 52.85 percent in 1966-67 to 41.33 percent in 1998-99¹³.

Several reasons can be identified for the crisis in Punjab agriculture of which the main are the following.

Firstly, it is undeniable that the green revolution had a profoundly uneven impact on different categories of farms. Unlike many other states in India Punjab is not known for very large landholdings, and it is dominated by medium and large landholdings. Medium and large landholdings proved especially profitable for the use of new technology. On the other hand, marginal and small landholding do not permit the optimal use of the technologies of the green revolution, and marginal and small farmers do not possess the resources to buy the package of high yielding varieties of seeds, chemical fertilisers, tractors and combines. Resultantly the first post-green revolution phase from 1965-66 to 1980 saw a shrinking of marginal and small landholdings and a small increase in the size of large landholdings. With the creation of a market in land, and the generation of employment on land based activities, marginal and small farmers had the incentive to either sell their land or lease it out to medium and large farmers¹⁴.

However from 1980 onwards profitability in agriculture began to fall, and limited thereby the growth of employment opportunities. Even as the absolute number of landholdings increased, the average size of landholdings contracted from 4.07 ha in 80-81 to 3.61 ha in 1990-91. All except small farmers registered a decline in the average size of their land holdings but the number of marginal farmers increased by 50 percent in the period 1980-81 to 1990-91, while their operating land base during the same period increased from a total of 1.26.000 ha to 1.64.000 ha; an increase of 30 percent. Small farms also increased because of the subdivision of farm land under laws of inheritance¹⁵.

In the third phase that is from the 1990s onwards, these developments were slightly arrested with data from the agricultural census 1995-96 showing that except for marginal and small farms, the average holding size improved to nearly 3.80 ha. But this is still considerably below the level of 1980-81¹⁶. In general the average size of landholdings has over the years contracted¹⁷. Fragmentation of land holdings not only ensured that the advantages of new technology could not be fully utilised, the growing scarcity of employment opportunities in the non-farm sector from 1980s onward meant that the pressure on the land grew, making

¹² M.S Aluwalia, 2000, 'Economic Performance of States in Post-reform Period' *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol 35, no 19, 6 May pg 1637- 1648.

¹³ Lakhwinder Singh & Sukhpal Singh, 2002, "Deceleration of Economic Growth in Punjab: Evidence, Explanation and a Way Out" *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 37, No. 6, February 9- 15, pp 579-588 in pp 581-582

¹⁴ *PDR*, pg 112

¹⁵ *ibid*, pg 112

¹⁶ *ibid* pg 113

¹⁷ *ibid*, pg 111

small landholdings even more unviable. Consequently, the period from the 1990s has been marked by static returns per ha.

The effects of all this were momentous. It has been estimated that by 1998 20 percent of the farming population-24 percent of small farmers and 31 percent of marginal farmers-came under the poverty line, and the family income of 47 percent of households from agriculture as well as dairy farming is less than the lowest pay scale of an unskilled worker in the state¹⁸. Analysts tell us that large landholdings were also impacted, and that by the 1980's income from a seven-hectare farm was lower than the annual income of a government department assistant¹⁹.

Whereas the overwhelming presence of marginal and small farms cancels out the benefits of advanced technology, and whereas agriculture on small farms does not generate labour absorptive capacities, there are other reasons for the decline in Punjab agriculture. For one, rapid increases in the cost of inputs which go into the making of the green revolution package have made the survival of small farms difficult. The returns per ha in Punjab were lower than the returns per ha in Madhya Pradesh²⁰. Secondly, Punjab has got bogged down in a two crop economy making it difficult to shift to new patterns of cropping. Thirdly and more importantly, extensive use of new technology has led to the degradation of the environment. As both wheat and paddy are water intensive crops, massive ground water based irrigation has resulted in a depleting water table in Punjab. According to estimates the water table in central Punjab is going down at the rate of 0.23 centimetre per annum. Other parts of the state are witnessing a rise in the water table, resulting in salinity and water logging. Widespread deficiency on micro-nutrient has appeared in the soil (soil degradation) and there is an increase in weed infestation, pest and disease outbreak.

But in the main agricultural slow down in the state coincided with the introduction of liberalisation in India and with the coming into being of the WTO regime. The introduction of liberalisation accentuated the agricultural crisis mainly because the policy environment changed. From the days when the central and the state government actively supported agricultural transformation in the state, from the time when agricultural extension officers visited the fields for long periods of time to instruct farmers in the use of new technology, the state now seeks to energise the economy through the interplay of market forces. The development expenditure of the state government dropped from 71.92 percent to 64.92 percent of the total government expenditure in the period 1981-1991 largely on account of militancy, but there was no reversal of this trend when normalcy returned in the 1990s. On the contrary it witnessed a further drop and according to 1998-99 estimates, it was 46.49 percent of the total government expenditure²¹.

Initially, there was some optimism among experts that the WTO regime might actually favour Indian agriculture because (a) the subsidies provided by the Indian government to farmers are well within the WTO limits, and (b) international agricultural prices were expected to go

¹⁸ These figures were part of the agenda paper of the brainstorming session organised jointly by the Punjab Government and the Punjab Agricultural University Ludhiana in October 1998 to discuss the conditions of farmers and farming in Punjab. See Ramesh Chand, 1999, "Emerging Crisis in Punjab Agriculture: Severity and Options for Future" *Economic and Political Weekly. Special Issue on Agriculture*, March 27, pp A7-A10 in pg A3.

¹⁹ Lakhwinder Singh & Sukhpal Singh, op cit

²⁰ ibid, pg 584

²¹ Source, *Statistical Abstract of Punjab*, Economic Advisor to Government of Punjab, (Various Years)

down even as developed countries cut down subsidies to their farming sectors. This should have resulted in a surge of agricultural exports which could have benefited the farmers. Moreover, the export of agricultural products should have been facilitated by accessibility to the markets of member countries as stipulated by WTO provisions²². These expectations proved misplaced and optimism has given way to apprehension that the new international trade regime is in fact drastically counterproductive for countries like India in general and states like Punjab in particular. In fact contrary to predictions, not only have international agricultural prices declined sharply in post WTO period, agricultural exports from developing countries like India have also dwindled. Further the developed world has actually protected the interest of its farmers by the grant of subsidies in different forms. In sum the new international trade regime hardly grants to the farmers of the developing world a level playing field²³.

All these factors have combined to create an economic crisis of some magnitude in the agrarian sector. As the concept note circulated at the brainstorming session organised by the Government of Punjab and Punjab Agricultural University in Ludhiana²⁴ in 1998 makes clear, not only has the economic condition of vast majority of farmers deteriorated, these conditions cannot be improved within existing cropping systems. Nor can the problems be remedied by the use of existing technology because this has already been exploited to 75 percent of its potential.

In sum, the proliferation of small landholdings, increases in costs of production, stagnating returns, over-exploitation of natural resources, declining public and private sector investments, inadequate marketing and pricing, insufficient processing of vegetables, fruit, and other crops, dwindling research and extension inputs, low investment flows in agro-processing industries, and above all the withdrawal of the state from the supportive role that it played till the late 1980s, have combined to create a serious agrarian crisis. All this has resulted in declining employment avenues for rural people. The problem is compounded by the fact that other sectors of the economy provide few opportunities for employment. 'One of the serious problems Punjab is confronted with at present' states the Punjab Development Report 2004, 'is the high volume of unemployment. Disguised unemployment in the agricultural sector and the large volume of low-quality, existing employment, are causes for concern...The growth of employment has not been commensurate with that of the state domestic product, resulting in underutilisation of the labour force'²⁵. The rate of unemployment is not high compared to the rest of the states in the country, but it increased from 3.08 percent during 1993-94 to 4.15 percent on current daily statuses during 1999-2000, with urban unemployment rates higher than rural unemployment. 91 percent of the workforce in the state is engaged in the informal sector, 42 percent of the work force is illiterate, and 53 percent of the unskilled or semi-skilled workforce is employed in the rural areas. More serious is the high rate of unemployment among graduates.

²² Ashok Gulati and Anil Sharma, 2001, "Agriculture and GATT: What it Holds for India" in K. S. Dhindsa & Anju Sharma (eds.) *Dynamics of Agricultural Development (Vol. 3): Policy Planning and Liberalization*, New Delhi, Concept Publishing Company, pg 277-295.

²³ Chand, R & Linu M. Philip, 2001, "Subsidies and Support in Agriculture: Is WTO Providing A Level Playing Field?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 11, pg 3014- 3016.

²⁴ The note was titled "Punjab Agriculture 2020: Farmers and Farming in Punjab"

²⁵ PDR, pg 510

The growth of organised sector employment especially in the public sector has declined from 1.01 percent during 1990-95 to 0.19 percent during 1999-2000. The growth rate of employment in the private sector decreased from 2.34 percent to 0.80 percent in the same period. It is estimated that by the end of the Tenth Five Year Plan unemployment figures will actually rise, because the state is unable to generate regular income employment in the foreseeable future. According to a Planning Commission estimate, Punjab's projected employment growth rate is the lowest among major states. During the Ninth plan period of 1997-2002, employment in the state was projected to grow at 0.73 percent per annum against the projected labour force growth rate of 2.27 percent per annum. According to the Fourth Economic Survey of Punjab in 1998, there are nearly fifteen lakh unemployed persons in Punjab, of which nearly 70 percent belong to the rural areas²⁶. According to an estimate, approximately 12.85 lakh agricultural workers are surplus²⁷. With employment opportunities in the agrarian sector declining, and few opportunities available in non-land activities, the employment scenario in the state has acquired serious proportions.

In short, the political economy of Punjab is marked by the following features:

- Agriculture in Punjab is highly commercialized. Commercialization benefited rural Punjab in the 1970s and early 1980s when the state witnessed high rates of economic growth. Correspondingly, the increase in the total area of cultivation resulted in a surge of agricultural employment despite the introduction of the technology intensive and labour replacing green revolution strategy.
- But the benefits of the green revolution technology were uneven with the marginal and small farmers of Punjab, who constitute a large section of the farming population in the state, adversely affected. In the first phase of the green revolution itself, the number of marginal and small holdings declined sharply while those in higher size category showed a modest increase. Afterwards, even if this trend witnessed a reversal, it was fast becoming clear that agriculture in marginal and small land holdings has become unviable.
- Since agriculture in the state has reached saturation point, it is unable to provide employment. If marginal and small farmers are sticking to agriculture, this is because of the unavailability of alternative employment avenues. With the decline in agriculture, allied activities that grow around farming have also witnessed a decline. Resultantly an army of semi-educated unemployed youth have either migrated abroad or resorted to drugs, a fact that the Punjab Development Report has noted with some concern.
- The decline in the growth rate in the 1980s not only brought a sense of relative deprivation but also impoverishment for many as for instance witnessed in the emergence of a second hand tractor market.²⁸
- The crisis of agrarian sector would not have adversely affected the people had it been compensated by the other major sector, i.e. industry. However, industry in Punjab does not give us a very pretty picture in terms of GDP and employment. Though industry showed some signs of revival in the initial years of post-conflict Punjab, the trend could not be sustained for long. If we look at the share of manufacturing sector in State Gross Domestic Product it was recorded as 21.1 percent in 1990-91, which is a small jump from 19.4 percent in the year 1985-86. However, this trend witnessed a reversal in the ensuing years and was recorded at 17.1 percent in the year 1999-2000.

²⁶ *ibid*, pg 510-42

²⁷ Ghuman, 2000, "Implications of WTO Regime: Challenges Before Punjab Agriculture" *The Tribune* Chandigarh, June 19.

²⁸ Sukhpal Singh, 2002 "Crisis in Punjab Agriculture" *Economic and Political Weekly* June 3, pg. 1889-1892.

Whatever growth in employment has taken place in the manufacturing sector, it is clearly not sufficient for accommodating the large army of the rural unemployed.

It was only because the Indian state pursued with great vigour a single point programme, the achievement of self-sufficiency in food grains that the green revolution technology could take off in Punjab. An initiative of a similar scale, urgency, and intensity is required to reverse the downward movement of Punjab agriculture. Existing technology needed to be corrected and the two crop pattern needs to be diversified. However, the policy of liberalisation has meant disengagement rather than the engagement of the state from such affairs. For it involves the eventual phasing out of subsidies and the elimination of price control on food grains.²⁹ Unfortunately, the onset of liberalisation also happened to be the precise phase when Punjab was most ill prepared to go that way. It also so happened that liberalisation compounded the economic problems of Punjab at a time when the political elite in Punjab was least inclined to come to grips with these problems.

II

Electoral Politics in Punjab

Given the crisis in the agrarian economy in Punjab, electoral politics, political mobilisation, and policies *should* have revolved around the agrarian crisis and the socio-economic repercussions of the crisis. But even though the two main political parties in the state have taken up the issue randomly, these references are more in the nature of rhetorical flourishes. The agrarian crisis has just not formed the linchpin of electoral politics, political mobilisation, or policies quite in the manner it should have done. This to any student of public policy is astonishing, for policy makers in a democracy *are* expected to address the basic problems of citizens, deal with them, and produce appropriate policies. What are the causes of the failure of democratic politics to do so?

The context of the elections to the state assembly in Punjab in 1992- which were held after five years of President's Rule in the state³⁰-was characterised by three factors, each of which combined to draw politics in the direction of indeterminacy. Firstly, the central government which was at that time controlled by the Congress party was resolute that elections should be held to the state legislative assembly even though militancy had not yet been contained. Secondly, the militants called for a boycott of the elections and threatened the use of violence against any person who dared to cast her or his vote. Thirdly, the Akali Dal which had by that time fragmented into a number of groups boycotted the elections. Only AD (K) - the faction led by Amrinder Singh- contested the elections.

The process of holding the elections was deeply marred by violence, and elections could take place after a number of abortive moves that cost not a few candidates their lives. For

²⁹ V. M. Rao, 2001 "Farmers in Market Economy: Would Farmers Gain through Liberalization?" in K. S. Dhindsa & Anju Sharma (eds.) *Dynamics of Agricultural Development: Policy Planning and Liberalization*, New Delhi, Concept Publishing Company, pg 319-355.

³⁰ In September 1985 elections were held to the legislative assembly. The AD and the Longowal faction in the AD scored a great success and secured 73 seats in the assembly. A government under Chief Minister Surjit Singh Barnala ruled the state from September 1985 to May 1987. In 1986 27 AD MLAs led by Prakash Singh Badal defected and sought recognition as a separate group, leaving Barnala dependent on the support of the Congress. In the meanwhile militant activities continued to mount and in April 1986 militant organizations declared an independent state of Khalistan from the precincts of the Golden Temple. In 1987 the central government imposed Presidents Rule on the state. Elections were held to Parliament in 1989 November but elections to the state legislative assembly were held seven years after the 1985 elections.

instance when the central government tried to hold elections both to the state assembly and to parliament in June 1991, not less than 28 candidates were killed by militants. Resultantly, the elections were countermanded in 3 Lok Sabha and 17 assembly constituencies even before they were completely called off. When elections to the state assembly were finally held in 1992, the generalised environment of fear resulted in an all time low electoral participation with just 24 percent of the electorate casting its vote.

The extraordinariness of the elections themselves, held as they were amidst violence and the call for a boycott, shaped the rhetoric and the electoral strategy of political parties. The first major bone of contention between the two main parties: the AD and the Congress, was whether the elections should be held at all. The Congress insisted that the return of normal 'democratic' politics was an essential precondition for the return of peace. Various factions of the AD on the other hand argued that the elections could not be held for two reasons. Firstly all outstanding issues remained unresolved. Secondly the overwhelming presence of security forces almost guaranteed that elections could not be free and fair. If we look at the position of pro-election parties i.e. the Congress, the Akali Dal (K) faction which was at that time led by Amarinder Singh³¹, the CPI and other small parties on the one hand, and anti-election groups i.e. Akalis of different shades on the other, it is very clear that the fundamental difference between the two groups was the following: what should come first popular government or peace? To reiterate the point made above, while pro-election groups argued the installation of a popular government was important for the restoration of normalcy, those boycotting elections insisted that unless peace was restored, the formation of popular government was simply not possible³². In other words, whereas the Akalis campaigned for a boycott of the elections by challenging the legitimacy of the election itself, the participants in the electoral process were riding the peace plank. The two sides in short disagreed upon the legitimacy of elections themselves.

The reluctance of all factions of the AD save one to contest elections can be traced to two factors. One, the Akalis found that they were unable to completely ignore the boycott call given by militant groups. From the late 1970s militant groups had challenged the capacity of the AD to safeguard the interests of the state in general, and the Sikh community in particular, against the authoritarian proclivities of the central government. The reason why a 'third' force had arisen in Punjab politics had largely to do with the perception that the Akalis had not pressed the case for state autonomy in the durbar of the central government either competently or seriously. In effect the militants challenged the very legitimacy of the AD to represent the interests of the panth. To ignore the boycott call would have been to invite further political disaster.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly the AD had 'lost face' simply because it was unable to secure even one demand of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution- the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, control over irrigation projects, adequate support from the central government for agriculture, and above all the recasting of centre-state relations. What could it take to the people of Punjab? Why should the people vote for the AD considering that the confrontation between the party and the central government in the period 1977-1984 had come to naught? Matters would have been different if the central government had given to the state an economic and political package that would have satisfied at least some of the demands of the Resolution. But this did not happen.

³¹ Amarinder Singh later joined the Congress

³² *The Frontline*, Vol. 9 Feb 28 1992 pg. 13-15.

The reason why the Congress did not deliver such a package can be traced to political pragmatism arising out of electoral calculations. For the act would have practically guaranteed the return of the AD to state politics. As electoral strategies go, this was a master stroke. Knowing that the announcement of such a package would give the Akalis reason to contest the elections, the Congress party/central government deliberately withheld it. It was clear that the idea was to facilitate a Congress win by forcing the Akalis to withdraw from the elections. And it was equally clear from the statements of Akali leaders that they wanted something concrete from the central government before they went before the electorate given the general disenchantment with Akali politics. In fact dominant leaders in the Akali Dal were to point this out publicly. It is worthwhile reflecting in this context that a special package for the state would have helped the moderate sections of Akalis to chart out a political agenda independent from that of extremist Akali groups, as well as from the militants. But in the absence of any concrete offer from the central government, the Akalis simply did not have the required political resources at their disposal to contest the elections³³. In effect the Congress virtually pushed the Akalis into boycotting the 1992 elections. For the Congress on the other hand it simply made for good political sense to connect the grant of such a package with its own victory in the elections. To put it bluntly, the people of the state would be rewarded *if* they voted for the Congress.

The Akalis protested in vain that the very legitimacy and fairness of the exercise was under doubt. Given the permutations and combinations of electoral politics in the state, it is not surprising that the Congress came to power in the state with Beant Singh as the Chief Minister. The low electoral turn out however cast a damper on the legitimacy of the new government. The Congress government came to power on a very thin electoral back up not only because the electoral turn out was the lowest in the state which is otherwise marked by high voting turnouts, but also because the turn out in elections was the lowest in the last four decades of elections in India³⁴. Though it is difficult to distinguish between those who *choose not to vote* from those *who did not vote out of fear*, analysts believe that in the contest between the participants and the boycotters, the latter were the clear winners³⁵. The low turn out was interpreted by the Akalis as a victory of their boycott call rather than as a victory of the Congress Party. Besides parties like Bahujan Samaj Party and the Communist Party of India conceded that the legitimacy of the entire exercise was doubtful because of the boycott and because of the low turnout³⁶. Whereas the question-who won and who lost in the 1992 elections in the state and why- is of great interest to psephologists for very good reasons, the Congress government did manage to complete its full terms of five years. It also remained faithful to the main plank of its electoral agenda: peace. In was in pursuit of this nebulous concept termed peace that the Congress was to suppress militancy with an iron hand.

The electoral games that the two main parties in Punjab played in order to restore their image in the collective mind had the expected fall out. The Congress, already suffering from a legitimacy deficit because of its role in the conflict, a legitimacy deficit which was worsened in the 1992 elections, made the restoration of normalcy and the return of peace to the state its main concern. The only problem is that it defined restoration of 'normalcy and

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Yogendra Yadav, 1992, "Who Won in Punjab: Of the Real Contest" *Frontline* April, Vol. 10, pg. 122-126.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Senior CPI leader Satpal Dang and BSP leader Dr. Ramlal Jassi stated in separate interviews to the press that any electio in Punjab without Akali participation was not complete. See *The Frontline* issues of Feb 28 & March 27, 1992. Also, Yogendra Yadav, 1992 "Who Won in Punjab: Of the Real Contest"

peace' strictly in political terms; the agenda had no place for the social or economic reconstruction of the state. Both the demands of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution and the promised economic package for the state remained unfulfilled and undelivered. The Congress simply assumed that since it had become acceptable to the people albeit through a restricted voter turn out, all that it needed to do was to ensure the containment of militancy. Though the Congress government made the right kind of noises in terms of development, it was clear that politics and policy alike were concerned with peace defined narrowly as the elimination of militancy. It was simply not accompanied by any policy initiative for the long term economic regeneration of the state. Admittedly one constraint on the forging of this agenda was the resource crunch because a large part of the resources were spent on containing violent conflict. In the period 1988-1993 the expenditure of the state government increased by approximately 17.5 percent, but most of this increase went into fighting militancy³⁷. But this was not the only factor which fed into the neglect of economic and social issues; equally important was the way in which the government interpreted both its mandate and political agenda, that of restoring normalcy. Resultantly the impending agrarian crisis was completely ignored.

In the post election scenario the issue of peace was to dominate state politics for many years to come even as the Akalis were trying to put their own house in order. They in effect progressively realised that they needed to chart out an agenda which was independent to that of the militants. The Akalis had to in other words regain the political ground that had been appropriated by the militants in the 1980s in order to compete with the Congress. Within a year conditions in the state changed somewhat and the Akalis decided to participate in the panchayat elections in 1993, in which more than 80 percent people turned out to vote. Though this impressive increase in electoral participation was due to the fact that the Akalis participated in the elections, and to the localised nature of the poll, the Congress Government claimed that the electoral turn out represented a vote of confidence in the government³⁸.

The situation had however dramatically changed by the time the next assembly elections took place in 1997 in Punjab. For one the Akalis had come out of the twilight of militancy in order to participate in the electoral process. Secondly, various Akali factions decided to come together for electoral purposes³⁹. Thirdly, militant organizations were practically wiped out of the political scene. And fourthly, the Congress was in disarray after C.M Beant Singh was assassinated by a section of militants-the Babbar Khalsa. In sum, the 1997 assembly elections were held in normal conditions which were far removed from the hype, the contestation, the fear, and the apathy that had marked the 1992 elections.

Two factors were to govern the electoral outcome in 1997. One the Congress was hampered not only by the absence of the former C.M Beant Singh who had presided over the agenda of restoring normalcy, the party found itself completely out of sync in a situation in which its most important achievement-that of containing militancy- *was not an election issue*.

³⁷ *The Frontline*, Vol. 10, 1993 March 12, pg. 35. The industrial policy of the government envisaged the annual investment of 500 crores, but this did not take into account the agrarian sector.

³⁸ Interview with Chief Minister Beant Singh, *The Frontline*, Vol. 10 Feb 26, 1993, pg. 15.

³⁹ At the insistence of the Shrimoni Gurudwara Prabhandak Committee, various factions of the AD came together in 1993, but the alliance did not last for long and various factions took part in subsequent elections on their own. Also the Akali Dal was transformed into the Shrimoni Akali Dal or the SAD, however the changed name was adopted by various factions of the AD. Therefore, we use AD interchangeably with SAD.

Secondly, the electoral scene was transformed mainly because militant activities had subsided in Punjab, but also because Akali politics came to be cast in a new mould. By the time of the 1997 assembly elections, the AD under the leadership of Prakash Singh Badal⁴⁰, had not only firmly put the demand for state autonomy⁴¹ into the closet, it had entered into a regional alliance of the rightist BJP. This was not the first time this had happened. The AD which has never commanded more than 30 percent of the vote in the state, had been compelled to seek the most unlikely allies to come to power in the state in 1967, 1969, and 1977- the Jan Sangh which is the precursor of the BJP, the CPI which is decidedly against the merger of religion and politics, and the Janata party. In the process, the compulsions of electoral politics had forced the party to move to a more secular political idiom, and away from the slogan of the 'panth in danger' which had marked the struggle for a Punjabi Suba. But by the decade of the 1980s the AD had launched a struggle *against* the Hindu domination of India. And the BJP had launched a struggle *for* the Hindu domination of India. In the 1980s each party was wedded to different notions of what a nation is and what it should be. But in 1997 both parties came together to fight elections.

The following themes dominated the political platform of the AD-BJP alliance. One theme was that of the corruption of the previous Congress regime⁴². The AD- BJP combine promised to set up a Lokpal [ombudsman] which would have the power to bring the Chief Minister under its purview and which would deliver the state from corruption. 'Freedom from corruption' became the main slogan of the alliance and the main issue on which it sought to mobilise the people of the state. In the process, the Anandpur Sahib Resolution was firmly put into the storeroom because the BJP as a highly 'nationalistic' party has consistently refused to have any truck with what it sees as separatist agendas. The second issue on which the two parties found a common ground was what they called their 'religiosity'. Both parties stated that since Punjab is a land of Sants and Gurus only religious parties like the AD and BJP had the right to govern such a land. Prakash Singh Badal, the projected Chief Ministerial candidate of the alliance promised to the people of Punjab both "*Ramrajya* and governance on the line of the Sikh King Ranjit Singh" rolled into one⁴³. Consequently in its election manifesto, the AD declared that (a) the party would 'work for the Panth, Punjab, Punjabi and Punjabiyyat' and (b) would 'provide a corruption free government'. It is of some interest to note that the state assembly elections provided a testing ground in the practice of coalition politics for the BJP. By that time it was trying to reconcile its hard Hindutva line with the exigencies of coalition politics, simply because it had failed to win any ally in the aftermath of 1996 general election.

It is not that the AD manifesto had nothing for the farmers-it made references to development, roads, bridges, octroi, free power and water, traders demands, and fiscal

⁴⁰ Other Akali factions led by various extremist leaders also took part in the electoral fray- SAD (A) headed by Simaranjit Singh Mann, Panthic Akali Dal led by Bhai Jasbir Singh Rode, SAD (Wadala) led by Kuldip Singh Wadala, and SAD (Sukhjinder) led by Sukhjinder Singh. However, it was the section led by Badal that was the strongest and with largest support base. The other groups entered into an alliance with the BSP, but were wiped out in the elections.

⁴¹ The rhetoric of separatism in Punjab as in Kashmir has vacillated between demands for a separate state and demands for state autonomy.

⁴² Many leaders of the alliance said that the Congress has ceased to be a political party and has become a money harvesting machine instead. See *The Frontline*, Vol. 14, March 7 199, pg. 30.

⁴³ *The Frontline*, Vol. 14, February 7 1997, pg.36-38.

governance⁴⁴. The problem is that it addressed only the dominant concerns of the big farming lobby. Therefore, the manifesto promised free water and electricity for agriculture. Though the promise was undoubtedly farmer friendly inasmuch as it helped to bring down the costs of inputs considerably, it was by no means sufficient to address the worsening economic situation in rural Punjab. In other words the manifesto of the AD did not conceive or did not want to conceive of a larger plan or a long term strategy for the regeneration of agriculture. It provided sops more than anything else because the promise of free water and electricity was targeted to the noble purpose of garnering votes. The Congress on the other hand continued to harp on the issue of peace and promised to thwart the 'separatist tendencies of the Akalis as enshrined in Anandpur Sahib resolution'.

It is clear from the unprecedented mandate that went in favour of the Akalis that *by 1997 Punjab had outgrown the peace agenda*. People searched for new initiatives that could ward off the impending agrarian disaster, for a new policy initiative that would make agriculture profitable once again for all category of farmers; for a new vision which would arrest the declining productivity of soil and depleting water tables; for a new idea which would halt environmental degradation; and for a new policy framework which would create new avenues of employment. Their search was wasted. What they got were oratorical add-ons which promised free power and water. These incidentally are promises which have brought considerable harm to state governments all over India landing them as it were into the lap of financial deficit. Therefore when the new AD government came into power, it had neither a policy initiative nor a comprehensive plan at hand to deal with serious issues of livelihood. The absence of a far reaching agenda practically ensured that politics would be more of the same. And the issue of corruption on which the AD-BJP government had ridden to power in 1997 came back to haunt the alliance within a short period of time. But this time it was the turn of the Congress to charge the ruling alliance with rampant corruption and misrule in the state.

Ironically by the time the 2002 elections to the state assembly came around, the roles of the Congress and the AD were completely reversed. Firstly despite the fact that it was the AD which had raised crucial issues in the Anandpur Sahib Resolution which it had confronted the central government with in the late 1970s and the 1980s, now it was the Congress manifesto that spoke of interstate disputes like the Sutlej Yamuna Link and the handing over of Chandigarh and Punjabi speaking areas to Punjab. It is worthwhile to recollect that the AD had in the past attacked the Congress for *not* responding to these very demands. But in 2002 Congress included these very issues into its manifesto simply because the AD was in power in the centre as a part of the ruling National Democratic Front. The Congress in other words intended to embarrass the AD through holding aloft the very issues that had led to a confrontation between the two parties in the past. Secondly, in contrast to the 1997 elections, now it was the Congress that accused the Akalis of corruption. In the manifesto the Congress promised to set up a judicial commission headed by a sitting judge of the High court to inquire into acquisition of wealth and property by the Akali chief minister Mr Badal, his family members and other ministers of his government. In keeping with the agenda of governance that had become the core theme of most party manifestos in the country by 2000, the Congress manifesto further maintained that if the party came back to power, the Chief Minister and all ministers would declare their assets immediately after taking office, and maintain a model code of conduct and transparency in government work.

⁴⁴ See Ashutosh Kumar, 2004, 'Electoral Politics in Punjab' *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 3-9/10, vol xxxix, no 14 and 15, special issue on 'State Parties, National Ambitions' pp1515-1520.

The Congress manifesto made some reference to the worsening economic situation in its slogan of 'freedom from bankruptcy'⁴⁵. But ever faithful to its time honoured election strategy, the Congress promised everything to every section of society. Therefore when he released the party manifesto, the state party chief Amarinder Singh offered concessions worth 1200 crores to various sections of society- traders, farmers, weaker sections, and employees. In particular the manifesto promised to continue with its policy of free electricity and water for agriculture, and to assure relief to those farmers who run their tube wells by diesel. On macro economic issues, the manifesto stated that the Congress would not allow the dismantling of the minimum support price system, that it would provide crop insurance cover, and that it would abolish the arrest warrant system to recover cooperative loans. The manifesto also spoke about increasing irrigation capacity and of sops for unemployed youth, pensioners and ex-servicemen⁴⁶. Apparently drafted by the economists of the Agricultural University of Patiala, the AD manifesto was not far behind when it came to making promises to the farmers in particular and the rural population in general. This however bore little result because the party had done nothing to resuscitate the farm economy of the state during last five years of its rule apart from paying lip service to the needs of the farmers and offering sympathy if not tea. The AD manifesto at a more general level, sought to emphasise the past wrongs of the Congress Party and harped on the step motherly treatment meted out to the state by the Congress governments at the centre⁴⁷.

By the turn of the twenty first century the crisis in agriculture and the state economy had accentuated so much that the manifestos could ill afford to ignore this discomfiting fact. Whatever were the pledges and promises made by the major parties, they were clearly inadequate because they failed to address the root cause of the problem. In effect, no road map was offered by either of the parties for reviving the Punjab economy, all that was offered was sops. As a Tribune editorial tellingly commented, "with so much of shining stuff on offer, who has the time to think about issues like the decline in agriculture, lack of industrial growth and deficiencies in primary sectors? Bread is not essential when butter is being doled out" ⁴⁸. Such is the nature of electoral and democratic politics in the state of Punjab.

III

The Peasant Movement in Punjab

How is it that political parties can ignore the most burning of issues and yet mobilize votes? Do sections of the population who are affected adversely by economic decline not have the capacity to mobilise and press their demands? What for instance is the state of the farmer's movement, for after all it has been the farming community that has been worse hit by the crisis. Given the centrality of agriculture to the state and given the centrality of Punjab agriculture to food self-sufficiency in the country, why has the farmers' movement not been able to influence politics in the recent past? These are troubling questions answers to which can only be found in the history of the peasant movement in the state.

In Punjab the peasant movement arose as part of the nationalist struggle in the canal colony agitation of 1907 under leaders like Sardar Ajit Singh. Later, it was the landlords who activated peasants under the aegis of the Unionist Party. The Kisan Sabha movement of the

⁴⁵ The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 28 2002.

⁴⁶ *ibid*

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, February 2 2002.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, January 28 2002

Communist Party and Zamindara League of Chaudhary Chhotu Ram also mobilized peasantry during this period. However, it was the green revolution in the 1960s that instituted the material conditions for the growth of a sustained farmers' movement. Firstly, surplus production of food grains brought farmers into a close relationship with the market. In other words, farming became an enterprise that required professional solidarity.

Secondly, the green revolution also brought about far reaching changes in production relations since agriculture required hired rather than family labour. The growth of agricultural labour set the scene for a renewed emphasis on conditions of work⁴⁹. Thirdly, since the initial period of green revolution profited most sections, these sections of the farming class had a common interest in the prices fixed for inputs and outputs.

It was against this background that the Punjab Khetibari Zamindara Union [PKZU] -the predecessor of Bhartiya Kisan Union-was established in 1972. The result of the efforts of eight prominent leaders, the PKZU took up the troublesome issue of stagnant procurement prices for wheat. Between 1972 and 1984 the Union organised eight rounds of mobilization with the famous Raj Bhawan *gherao* of 1984 being the final one. Subsequently, the PKZU converted itself into the Punjab unit of the Bhartiya Kisan Union [BKU] in 1980⁵⁰. Predominantly a movement of the rich peasantry, the PKZU was more interested in issues such as higher procurement prices of wheat and paddy and subsidized prices of inputs such as electricity, diesel and fertilizers than issues related to marginal or small farmers. These issues were further marginalised because as a result of the rise of the BKU, Kisan Sabhas organised by the Communist Parties were considerably sidelined⁵¹. The activities of the PKZU however came to a halt in 1984 with Operation Blue Star making normal political activities impossible in the state. The *gherao* of the governor's house in the same year was arguably the peak of BKU mobilization, so much so that Operation Blue Star was interpreted by the leaders of the movement as 'a diversionary tactics by the central government to contain the farmers' strength in Punjab'⁵².

Militancy affected the activities of the farmers' movement considerably because it diverted attention away from everyday life and livelihood into other channels such as the demand for Khalistan. Moreover, during the same period differences began to crop up between the leaders on various issues. In 1989 the first split in the movement took place even as Ajmer Singh Lakhowal and Manjit Singh Kadian separated and formed another organization. The residual group was now left with Bhupinder Singh Mann and Balbir Singh Rajewal. The division was apparently triggered off by the nomination of Bhupinder Singh Mann to the Rajya Sabha by the V.P Singh government then in power at the centre.

⁴⁹ Sucha Singh Gill, 2000, "Agrarian Change and Farmers' Movement in Punjab: A Study of BKU" in Harish K Puri and Paramjit Singh Judge (eds.) *Social and Political Movements*, New Delhi, Rawat Publications, pg. 356- 377.

⁵⁰ Sucha Singh Gill & K C Singhal, 1984, "Punjab Farmers' Agitation: Response to Development Crisis of Agriculture" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 19, No. 40, pg. 1728-1732.

⁵¹ Sucha Singh Gill, 2004, "Farmers' Movement: Continuity and Change" *Economic and Political Weekly* July 3, vol xxxix, no 27, pp2964-2966. Incidentally, the medium and big farmer dominated PBKU further isolated the issues pertaining to landless workers. The PBKU invariably took a pro-farmer stand whenever workers put forth demands such as a wage hike. Debanjani Chakrabarti "From Green revolution to Liberalisation: Growth of Agrarian Capitalism in Punjab" (Unpublished dissertation, JNU)

⁵² Partha Nath Mukherji, 1998, "The Farmers' Movement in Punjab: Politics of Pressure Groups and Pressure of Party Politics" *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 2, 1043- 1048.

The division gained more ideological content later, because various farmers' groups were faced with the need to take a considered stand on the issue of liberalisation of the Indian economy in general and of the agricultural sector in particular. The members of the Mann-Rajewal group favoured liberalisation policies because in their opinion, open trade of agricultural produces would benefit farmers. They thus joined the principal defender of this ideological line, Sharad Joshi of the Shetkari Mazdoor Sangathan at the national level. But the Lakhwal-Kadiyan group was much more skeptical about the known and unknown consequences of such a policy. It therefore aligned with Mahendra Singh Tikait of U.P and Nanjundaswami of Karnataka to fight liberalisation⁵³.

The Rajewal and Kadiyan group was to go through yet another vertical division in 1994 when the Left elements in the organization decided to go ahead and form BKU (Ekta). Since 2003, there have been further divisions in BKU (Ekta) and as things stand now, there are several peasant organizations in Punjab: three factions of BKU, three factions of Kisan Sabhas controlled by CPI, CPI(M), and a faction of the CPI(M) respectively, and an independent left oriented peasant organisation. Even though many scholars are optimistic about the resurgence of the peasant movement given the unprecedented stress that Punjab peasantry is facing today, the fragmentation of the movement since the 1990s is actually cause for some pessimism for the following reasons.

Firstly, militancy not only created a political environment which was not at all conducive for the mobilisation of farmers, it actually marginalised issues relating to the farming community. The period between 1980 and 1992-the lost years of Punjab politics- have had a major and a lingering impact on farmers' mobilisation in the state. Therefore, when the challenging decade of the 1990s came calling, the farmers' movement in Punjab was organisationally fragmented and ideologically blunted with a dwindling support base. In sum, farmers and their issues were more or less absent from the political scene of Punjab during the major part of the decade of 1990s.

Secondly, the internal contradictions of the peasantry began to emerge most forcefully during precisely this period. This contradiction articulated itself most sharply on the issue of liberalisation and the WTO regime. Even as big farmers in Punjab as in much of the country came to believe that free market policies would mean more profit for them because they had the capacity to compete internationally, smaller farmers justifiably felt that new policies were going to marginalise them even further.

Thirdly, the peasant movement in Punjab led by BKU had always maintained a strategic distance from political parties ever since its formation. Nor has it accepted any support from political parties during mobilizations and demonstrations even though such support was offered. Conversely the BKU has not at any point extended electoral or political support to any political party till the late 1980s. In the aftermath of militancy some factions of the movement did begin to politically flirt with one party or the other. But high politics divided the movement with the nomination of Bhupinder Singh Mann to the Rajya Sabha, and his close links with the central government, triggering the first split in the organisation. The second split that saw the emergence of BKU (Ekta) was an outcome of Lokhewal's close involvement with Akali politics, an involvement that many in the organization challenged as against the spirit of the movement. Subsequently even as the Ekta group moved closer to the Kisan Sabhas organized under the aegis of communist parties particularly on the anti-WTO and

⁵³ Ibid.

liberalisation plank, the Lokhewal group held a Jat panchayat at Ludhiyana in March 1995 and announced that the organisation would transform itself into a political party with the purpose of capturing political power at the state level.

Finally even as the BKU brand of peasant mobilization brought various sections of farmers under the leadership of large farmers; the basic thrust of the entire movement: subsidization of input prices and maximization of output prices was premised on the assumption that green revolution technologies were going to work for all the time to come. However, once it became increasingly clear by the 1990s that this was not the case and that the agrarian revolution of the 1960s was petering out, the agenda and the strategy of the movement itself required a fresh look. Considering that the agrarian crisis has been caused by the declining productivity, soil degradation, water depletion, and dwindling difference between input and output prices, any enduring solution requires much more than economic concessions. For instance the issue of soil and water conservation requires a much more holistic approach than the one adopted by the movement so far. There are instances of some factions of the movement taking the initiative and helping farmers diversify into agro-industrial and other sectors. However, neither of these factions has launched any collective program for environmental conservation.

In sum the farmers' movement has neither managed to address the structural crisis in Punjab agriculture, nor managed to press the government to do so. For this requires clarity of approach, consensus on the causes of the problem, and an equal consensus on the solution. But the farmers' movement in Punjab had been fragmented, with each division being wracked by internal contradictions and disagreements between the leadership and personalisation of issues. In the process even as the interests of the big farming lobby have been represented to some extent, the needs of the small and marginal farmers who have been hardest hit by the crisis in agriculture have been sidelined. The farmers' movement has consequently not been able to emerge as a formidable political force in the state. Consequently the state government continues to wend its own way, a way that is completely removed from the needs of the people of the state. In sum, the weaknesses of peasant mobilisation in the state have allowed political parties to ignore farmers' issues.

Conclusion

If we were to return to the question of what does politics in post-conflict societies look like the answer may well be: catch-all and for that very reason indeterminate. The need of the AD and of the Congress to reinvent agendas in order to recapture the legitimacy that they had lost led them to hold aloft agendas that had little to do with the pressing needs of the peasantry. The 1992 election which was conducted in the shadow of lingering violence, by the call for a boycott of the elections and by the refusal of the majority of the Akali factions to participate threw up two main issues- return to peace and the validity of the election itself. The second election in 1997 was organised around two themes-corruption and the need for a religious Punjab to be governed by religious parties. The 2002 election saw a reversal of agendas and of stands, with now the Congress accusing the AD of neither securing any demand that was vital to the future of the state-the return of Chandigarh for instance, and of corruption. In all this the structural roots of the impending agrarian crisis have been simply ignored or put aside as secondary to the consideration to come into power.

Punjab is once again in the throes of a crisis, but this time the crisis is economic and not political. And just like politics was unable to negotiate the grievances that led to militancy in the first place, it is unable to address the problems that have led to a structural crisis in

agriculture. Politics remains confined to the making and unmaking of governments even as it refuses to recognise let alone resolve the major problems that have beset the state of Punjab since its inception in 1966.

APPENDIX**Chart 1**

Punjab Assembly Elections 1992: Party-wise Performance

Total Seats -117 Total Turn out (%) -23.8

Party (1)	Seats Contested (2)	Seats Won (3)	Vote (%) Secured (4)
INC	115	87	43.71
BSP	105	9	16.32
BJP	67	6	16.60
CPI	20	4	3.64
SAD	58	3	5.20
CPM	17	1	2.40
JD	37	1	2.15
UCPI	1	1	0.48
IPF/CPML	4	1	0.24
LKD	1	0	0.01
BKUS	1	0	0.01
BJMD	1	0	0.01
SAD (K)	1	0	0.1
DPP	1	0	0.01
Independent	150	4	9.21
Total	579	117	100.00

[Source: www.eci.gov.in]

Chart-2**Punjab Assembly Elections 1997 :Party-wise Performance**

Total Seats → 117

Total Turn out (%) → 68.7

Party (1)	Seats Contested (2)	Seats Won (3)	Vote (%) Secured (4)
SAD	92	75	37.64
BJP	22	18	8.33
INC	105	14	26.59
CPI	15	2	2.98
BSP	67	1	7.48
SAD(M)	30	1	3.10
CPM	25	0	1.79
JD	27	0	0.56
BSP(A)	24	0	0.24
CPIML(L)	4	0	0.08
SMT	2	0	0.03
FBL	3	0	0.02
MCPI(S)	1	0	0.02
UCPI	1	0	0.02
SJP(R)	6	0	0.02
SHS	3	0	0.01
SP	2	0	0.01
JNP	1	0	0.01
RPI	1	0	0.01
SHS(R)	4	0	0.01
Other Parties	14	0	0.18
Independent	244	6	10.87

[Source: www.eci.gov.in]

Chart-3**Punjab Assembly Elections 2002: Party-wise Performance**

Total Seats → 117

Turn out (%) → 65.0

Party (1)	Seats Contested (2)	Seats Won (3)	Vote (%) Secured (4)
Congress	106	62	36.5
Akali Dal	90	41	30.5
BJP	24	3	5.7
CPI	10	1	1.7
CPI(M)	13	0	0.4
BSP/RPI/SCF	98	0	5.5
JD/JP/Soc/SSP/PSP	2	0	0.1
SADM	84	0	4.7
NCP	40	0	1.3
All Other Parties	180	0	2.2
Independent	275	9	11.4

[Source: www.eci.gov.in]