



## 2. Punjab: A Background

This chapter provides an account of Punjab's history. Important social and political changes are traced and the highs and lows of Punjab's past are charted. To start with, the chapter surveys Punjab's history up to the time India achieved Independence. Then there is a focus on the Green Revolution, which dramatically transformed Punjab's economy, followed by a look at the tumultuous period of Naxalite-inspired militancy in the state. Subsequently, there is an account of the period of militancy in the state in the 1980s until its collapse in the early 1990s. These specific events and periods have been selected because they have left an indelible mark on the life of the people. Additionally, Punjab, like all other states of the country, is a land of three or four distinct regions. Often many of the state's characteristics possess regional dimensions and many issues are strongly regional. Thus, the chapter ends with a comment on the regions of Punjab.

### History of Punjab

The term 'Punjab' emerged during the Mughal period when the province of Lahore was enlarged to cover the whole of the Bist Jalandhar Doab and the upper portions of the remaining four *doabs* or interfluves. 'Punjab' is thus actually co-terminous with the Mughal province of Lahore, that is, the Mughal Lahore became known as the province of *panj aab*. The boundaries of Punjab changed several times thereafter, under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the British and in independent India.

Punjab witnessed important political changes over the last millennium. Its rulers from the 11th to the 14th century were Turks. They were followed by the Afghans in the 15th and 16th centuries, and by the Mughals till the mid-18th century. The Sikhs ruled over Punjab for over eighty years before the advent of British rule in 1849. The policies of the Turko-Afghan, Mughal, Sikh and British rulers; and,



the religious movements during these centuries, as well as the freedom movement in the rest of India had important affects on the economic and social life of the province.

### **Punjab – Early Years**

There were many social changes as a result of Turkish rule. Traditional society so far had been closed and hierarchical, dominated by a rigid caste system in which the relative positions, duties and disadvantages of its different segments were determined by birth and were believed to be divinely ordained. This social structure began to significantly transform itself during the Turko-Afghan, Mughal, Sikh and British periods. The ruling class, or Rajputs, lost their status to newer elites and the Brahmins too lost state patronage. The upper castes, including Brahmins (priests) and Kshatriyas (rulers) were thus forced into other occupations. The former took to secular occupations; and the latter became, at best, *chaudharis*, collecting revenue from a group of villages. Others became cultivators, traders and shopkeepers.

As a result of the hierarchical order being weakened by the Turko-Afghans and the Mughals, much greater social mobility became possible. Artisans and service-providing groups could move from rural to urban areas and serve the new ruling class in cities and towns, which were increasing in size and numbers, due to a spurt in craft production and trade. The extension of cultivation

led to the emergence of new towns in the well cultivated upper *doabs* of Punjab. Merchants of Multan and Lahore began to play a crucial role in domestic and external trade. By the early 17th century, Punjab had an active commercial life, involving a wide range of traders, peddlers, brokers. The cash nexus was fairly well established under the Mughals, and interdependence between towns and the countryside increased considerably by the end of the 17th century.

The introduction of the 'Persian wheel' facilitated artificial irrigation, resulting in considerable increase in agricultural production. A certain degree of commercialisation of agriculture was in evidence during the early 17th century. The spinning wheel, carding-bow and improved wooden loom brought a major change in weaving technology and resulted in rapid growth in the textile industry under the Mughals. The introduction of lime mortar as cementing material and the abundance of lime (*chuna*) in Punjab facilitated brick-and-stone construction and gave impetus to the building industry. After the Turks introduced the manufacturing of paper, Sialkot emerged as an important centre of paper manufacture. Artisanal production, on the whole, continued to be carried on with elementary technology and simple tools in a system of production which was rooted in the caste society and based on the family as a unit of production. Minute specialisation by each occupational sub-caste created a vested interest in static labour-intensive technology. Since



#### Box 2.1: **Guru Nanak (1469-1539)**

GURU NANAK (1469-1539) based his message on the ideas of equality, universality and social commitment. All human beings, men and women, could join his path and become equal among themselves. They worshipped together in congregation (*sangat*), and ate together a common meal (*langar*). These two practices institutionalised the ideal of equality. All norms and values, whether spiritual or ethical, were equally

applicable to all his followers. Social responsibility and spirituality were the two sides of the same ideological coin. By installing one of his followers as the Guru in his lifetime, Guru Nanak made the position of the Guru and the disciple interchangeable. This concept served as the basis of the unity of Guruship, leading eventually to the uncompromisingly democratic idea of the Panth as the Guru.



production of necessities like textiles, metal articles, leather goods and agro-manufactures was highly localised, mass production and technological innovation became relatively difficult.

Islamic Law was introduced for the administration of justice under Turko-Afghan and Mughal rule. Islam made spirituality accessible to all sections of society and Punjab soon developed a sizeable Muslim population.

### **A Period of Social and Religious Change**

By the 16th century, many new ideas began to emerge. Sufism and the Sikh Panth gained considerable ground and popularity amongst the masses. Guru Nanak and his successors introduced and popularised a new ethic, which made no distinction on the basis of birth. To a large extent, spirituality became universally accessible.

The ideology of Guru Nanak and his successors had a special appeal for labouring sections. Day-labourers, craftsmen, agriculturists, traders and shopkeepers were electrified by the radical new doctrine. Their voluntary contributions to the common funds of the community enabled the Gurus to establish religious centres and establish new towns, which became centres of production and exchange. The financial independence of the community and its organisational networks spread all over the Mughal empire, making the Sikh Panth a sort of state within the Mughal empire.

The egalitarian nature of the Sikh Panth was reinforced by the institution of the Khalsa in 1699. In addition to equality in congregational worship and the community meal, the Khalsa encouraged equality in social and political life. The ideal was embodied in the doctrines of the scriptural Guru, that is, 'Guru-Granth Sahib', and the Guruship of the collectivity of the Khalsa, that is, Guru-Panth.

The 18th century struggle of the Khalsa was in many ways made possible by their faith in the Gurus, the doctrines they had propounded and the institutions they had evolved. It is significant that Punjab remains one of the few examples in India where the peasantry and backward castes were able to achieve political power. The Sikh social order was much more democratic than the traditional caste system which had so far dominated society.

### **British Rule**

British rule in Punjab introduced new institutions and technologies. The colonial state subscribed to the values of humanism, rationalism and progress. Yet the state was geared towards using its technological and industrial superiority to perpetuate its own domination and maximise its economic advantages.

Thus an increase in agrarian production meant that the surplus was taken away by foreign agencies. The network of perennial canals built by the new

#### **Box 2.2: Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708)**

GURU GOBIND SINGH (1666-1708) invited all the Sikhs to become his Khalsa by offering direct affiliation to him, accepting the new baptism of the (*khanda*) double-edged sword, with the obligations, among others, of keeping the hair uncut (*kesh*) and bearing arms. His objective was to unify the Sikh Panth in order to meet any external threat. He had already evolved the idea of war in the way of righteousness (*dharmayuddha*), which the Khalsa were now to

pursue. In the process, Guru Gobind Singh sharpened the distinctive identity of the Sikhs and added political commitment to the idea of social responsibility. The order of the Khalsa was more emphatically an egalitarian social order. He institutionalized the ideal of equality by vesting Guruship in the Khalsa Panth. Guru Gobind Singh's mission was the culmination of the Sikh movement, and a point of departure leading to the Khalsa Raj.



### Box 2.3: The Freedom Struggle

India's Freedom Struggle received a uniquely rich input from Punjab. In terms of sacrifice of life, property, jobs, and personal freedom, Punjab suffered more than any other province of British India. Relatively, among the Punjabis, the Sikhs suffered more, both as the revolutionaries and the peaceful agitators. The efficacy of non-violent passive resistance was successfully demonstrated first in the Akali *morchas*. The concern for *swadeshi* as an ideology and as a weapon was voiced first by the Punjabi Aryas. A secular all-India

orientation, combined with an international outlook and the vision of a radically different society entailed the Ghadar and the Naujwan Bharat Sabha. The latter also gave the war cry of *inquilab zindabad* and subscribed to the goal of complete independence before the Congress adopted it. Through the Jallianwala incident, Bhagat Singh and the INA trials, the Punjabis gave three powerful symbols to the freedom struggle. The issue of partition of India and of Punjab was clinched finally by the Punjabis themselves.

state, combined with new agricultural techniques, implements and seeds, made Punjab agriculturally the best-developed region of India. The bulk of its agricultural surplus entered foreign trade. The commercialisation of agriculture transformed the large peasant proprietor in the upper *doabs* and the canal colonies into a producer for the world

market. But the small peasant often had to depend on the moneylender to meet the fixed revenue demand. Thus, notwithstanding agricultural expansion and increase in production, an overwhelming proportion of the actual cultivators in colonial Punjab began to exist at the level of subsistence.



Shaheed-A-Azam, Sardar Bhagat Singh

As machine-made goods became available, the traditional artisan was faced with a shrinking market. As his incomes fell he began to look for opportunities outside the village community. However, not many opportunities were available since industry was slow to grow in Punjab. An increasing number of artisans thus became skilled and unskilled labourers on construction sites, railway tracks and railway workshops. Some migrated to the British colonies in Africa, Latin America and South-east Asia in search of work. However, others took to the new education and became professionals like teachers, lawyers and engineers. Some turned to petty trading and jobs related to industry; others joined the police, army and civil administration. Indeed, the new education became the single most important means of effecting a change in occupation.

The colonial state took two policy decisions regarding education: one, that it was the responsibility of the state to impart education to the people, and two, that it should focus mainly



on Western knowledge and English language. The system of education, thus, was aimed primarily to provide manpower for the administrative, technical and military requirements of the colonial state. The content of education developed by the government was totally secular, consisting of natural and social services, languages and literature.

However, Christian missionaries were not only allowed but also encouraged to undertake educational projects. Often, the evangelical content of their educational programme motivated English-educated Punjabis to devise their own programmes of education. By 1900, several educational institutions came up in the Punjab under the aegis of the Arya Samajis, Singh Sabhas and Islamic Anjumans. The 20th century saw the extension of private enterprise in education along with an enlargement of the educational responsibilities of local bodies, particularly through municipalities. The principle of free elementary education for boys was conceded in 1919 and for girls in 1940. In this instance, humanism and progress were allowed to triumph over the needs of the colonial state.

A similar tendency is evident in the sphere of medicine and health. By the time the British annexed Punjab, the idea of regular Western-style hospitals for Europeans and soldiers was well established. Within the first two decades of British rule in Punjab, civil hospitals and dispensaries of different grades were established mainly at the district and tehsil headquarters, and a medical school was set up in 1860 at Lahore. Dispensaries and hospitals were also run by the missionaries and charitable institutions, which received some assistance in the form of grants-in-aid. However most of these dispensaries catered to the urban population.

Municipalities were expected to take care of sanitation. There was great disparity between the



*Jallianwala Bagh, Memorial, Amritsar  
(Inset Shaheed Udham Singh)*

privileged enclaves occupied by the Europeans and congested urban centres and far flung rural areas in which Punjabis lived. Notwithstanding the number of hospitals and dispensaries in colonial Punjab, elementary health care reached only a small proportion of the population. Rural people suffered more than urban and women suffered more than men.

### **Social and Political Movements**

Social and religious reform was to a significant extent spurred by Christian missionaries. A reaction and interface with Western Christian thought resulted in many educated Punjabis organising themselves into such organisations such as the Anjuman-i-Islamia, Lahore (1869), the Lahore Brahmo Samaj (1863), the Singh Sabha, Amritsar (1873) and the Arya Samaj, Lahore (1877). These spread themselves throughout Punjab by the end of the century. Religion became the dominant concern of the reformers. Their other



major concern was the spread of education. They were deeply interested in the upliftment of women through education, establishing a higher age of marriage and reforming customs related to marriage and death. Other organisations taking an interest in religious and social reform of some kind were the Namdharis and Nirankaris among Sikhs; the Dev Samaj and the Sanatan Dharm among Hindus; and the Ahmadiyahs among Muslims.

However, certain measures adopted as reforms led to communal bitterness and competitiveness for power, position and honours in the colonial context.

The resistance to British rule in Punjab goes back to the 1840s. However, the freedom struggle in the official sense was a phenomenon of the early 20th century. The ideal of *swadeshi* became popular at this time. The period 1920-22 was one of the peaks of the struggle, when three movements converged, namely, the movement for Gurdwara reform led by the Central Sikh League and the Shiromani Akali Dal, the Non-cooperation Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and the Khilafat agitation, which mobilised the Muslims.

While sporadically responding to the Gandhian movements, many Punjabis became increasingly preoccupied with rivalries over provincial posts. The Muslim League's demand for Punjab and professional rivalries between Hindus and Muslims led to a sharpening of the communal divide which soon extended to villages. The determined resistance of the Akalis to the idea of Pakistan eventually obliged the government and the Congress to accede to their demand for the partition of the British province of Punjab rather than force non-Muslims to live in Pakistan.

To sum up, the British Raj greatly transformed Punjab. Different sub-regions of the province and

different sections of its population were differently affected by a century of colonial rule. Economically, and in terms of urbanisation, the upper *doabs* and canal colonies were better developed than the south-eastern districts comprising the Haryana area. Hindus and Sikhs were better off, compared to Muslims. Specifically, the segments that did well as the collaborators of the colonial state were the professional middle classes, large landholders and traders. Those artisans who diversified from their traditional vocations also benefited. However, compared to the 1840s, a much larger proportion of artisans, small cultivators and landless labourers appear to have become impoverished. They lived in a situation of slow famine created by a large external trade, fixity of revenue demand and growing indebtedness. Those of the rural poor who managed to move to the cities were forced to live in slums and earn a survival wage.

### **Punjab in Independent India**

In 1947, 13 out of 29 British districts of Punjab in undivided India came to East Punjab, which was renamed Punjab (India) on 26 January 1950. In 1948, the former princely states were organised separately as Himachal Pradesh and PEPSU (Patiala and East Punjab States Union), the latter merging with Punjab in 1956. Following the Akali agitation for a Punjabi-speaking state, and the Reorganisation Act of 1966, the territory of Punjab was bifurcated into the linguistic states of Punjab and Haryana, with the remaining hill areas going to Himachal Pradesh. Post-bifurcation, Punjab came to have an area of 50,362 sq. kilometres which was one-seventh of its size before independence. The new state was divided into eleven districts, including Rup Nagar, created as part of the reorganisation. Structurally, the development blocks which were introduced in 1952 presented the only new feature up to this period.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gopal Krishan and Surya Kant, 'Administrative Space', *Punjab in Prosperity and Violence: Administration, Politics and Social Change 1947-1997*, eds. J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga (Chandigarh: Institute of Punjab Studies, 1998), p. 4.



Following the re-organisation, Punjab took centre stage in the Green Revolution launched by the Government of India and the states. Much of what has happened in Punjab subsequently owes its origins, nature and impact in some direct or indirect way to the Green Revolution.

### **The Green Revolution**

In this section an attempt has been made to understand why the Green Revolution was so successful in Punjab, to scrutinise its results and contrast it with the present agrarian crisis.

India has gone from a food-deficit to a food-surplus country largely because of the agricultural transformation of Punjab. The economic transformation of rural Punjab is basically a story of agricultural transformation. During the 1960s a fundamental change occurred in the institutional and economic infrastructure due to massive public investment. There was irrigation and power development, agricultural research and extension services, and the strengthening of the co-operative credit structure. Already, consolidation of holdings and the predominance of owner farmers had created crucial pre-requisites for the Green Revolution.

Punjab led the country's Green Revolution of the 1960s and earned for itself the distinction of becoming India's 'bread basket'. The Green Revolution introduced a new technology of production in agriculture. The technology consisted of a package of inputs, such as, high-yielding varieties of seeds, chemical fertilisers, pesticides, insecticides, weedicides, machines like tractors, threshers, pumpsets/motors, combine harvesters/reapers and others. The proper usage of these inputs required an assured irrigation system, a peasantry with the will and capacity to adopt the new technology and a government willing to lend its support and investment. All these conditions were present in Punjab.



*High-Yielding Variety of Rice*

In fact, before the Green Revolution, Punjab had experienced certain developments that set the stage for its rapid spread. Before Independence, Punjab's agriculture had been dominated by peasant proprietors (Singh, 1989). The rapid settlement of land claims after the partition of the state, and the completion of the consolidation of land holdings by the end of the 1950s created a favourable man-land ratio. The fragmentation of land holdings seen in other states of India was thus taken care of. This encouraged peasant proprietors to invest in land improvement and adopt new technologies, as their holdings had become economically viable. Land reform measures also encouraged several land owners to reclaim their land from tenants for self-cultivation (Gill, 2001). Punjab was also a major beneficiary of British investment in irrigation works and development of canal colonies where peasants from the east and central Punjab were resettled. In the post-Independence period, canal irrigation was further developed by the state. By 1960-61 the net sown area irrigated in Punjab had gone up to 54 percent.

During the British period, agriculture in Punjab, particularly in the canal colonies was largely commercialised. The peasants who migrated to Indian Punjab from western Punjab in 1947-48 during Partition were experienced in and geared



towards commercial agricultural production. Thus, even before the availability of the Green Revolution technology, Punjab was showing signs of rapid agricultural development. Between 1953-55 to 1963-65, the index of agricultural production of all crops experienced a growth rate of 4 percent compared to 2.2 percent at the all India level (Singh, 2001). These conditions in Punjab were accompanied by an official policy of strengthening and promoting agricultural research and extension. The College of Agriculture at Ludhiana was converted into the Punjab Agricultural University (PAU) in 1962. PAU was put in charge of agricultural research and education in the state and played an active role. It is renowned for its work on high yielding varieties of seeds and technical innovations like fertiliser drills and threshers.

Simultaneously, the government invested massively in rural development, ranging from irrigation works, drainage of rain water, reclamation of land to solve the problem of land salinity. To promote investment at the farm level, arrangements were made for credit on long and short term crop loans through land mortgage, banks and a network of cooperative credit societies.

High-yielding dwarf varieties of wheat from the International Centre for Maize and Wheat Improvement (CIMMYT) Mexico, were introduced leading to bumper crops. The availability of assured irrigation for fertile lands provided a conducive environment that enabled a dynamic peasantry to accept innovations in seed technology. Several farmers already possessed the immediate capacity (supported by the government) to make the necessary investments in the new technology. These initial innovators were immediately imitated by other farmers, irrespective of the size of their holdings, when they observed the sudden jumps in per hectare yield.

The impact was dramatic. Between 1965-66 and 1970-71 the per hectare yield of wheat doubled, from 1104 kg per hectare in 1965-66 to 2238 kg in 1970-71. Following the success of the new technology in wheat in the mid-1970s, a breakthrough was achieved in dwarf high-yielding varieties of paddy. After wheat, paddy provided a major push to agricultural prosperity in the state. By the mid-1980s, except for the southern parts of Punjab, the state began to follow a 'wheat-paddy rotation' pattern in cultivation, and, as a consequence Punjab became the food bowl of the country. It became the largest contributor to the central pool of procurement of food grains both for food security, as well as for running the public distribution system of food grains. With the minimum support price for wheat and paddy combined with the procurement system of the union government, crop production was greatly supported.

The Green Revolution has been the backbone of Punjab's development. It increased cropping intensity from 126 percent in 1960-62 to 185 percent in 1996-97, and the net sown area as a percentage of the geographical area rose from 75 to 85 during this period. The number of tractors rose from 10,646 in 1962-65 to 234,006 in 1990-93 and pumps sets from 45,900 to 721,220. Fertiliser (NPK) consumption increased from 30,060 tonnes in 1962-65 to 1212,570 tonnes in 1990-93. Consumption of chemical inputs also increased.

An important social affect of the Green Revolution was the destruction of the old *jajmani* system and its replacement by a contractual relationship. This severely affected the fortunes of service castes and artisans and resulted in unemployment and underemployment. Many were driven to poverty.

Another social change was the disappearance of caste rigidities and the emergence of the middle





Box 2.4: **Case Study of Village Barwali Khurd, Machchiwara Block, Samrala Tehsil, Ludhiana**

Some of the major changes found in this study that may have taken place in a period of 30 years falling between 1965 and 1995 are highlighted as follows:

The increase in agriculture productivity was reflected in the increase in capital investment. More and more *pucca* houses were constructed and roads were paved. The village presently has a middle school, a rural dispensary, telephone service, *pucca* roads, a co-operative bank, a milk collection post, police post and a focal point.

The social gap between the higher and the lower castes became negligible in this period. A major change in the caste hierarchy was visible in both public ceremonial functions and interpersonal relations, strengthening the cross-caste alliance. The cross-caste similarity of lifestyles, helped to promote egalitarian social interaction.

Many agricultural labourers migrated from UP and Bihar and this led to a change of occupation for the local labourer from agriculture to other occupations like masonry, construction work, driving, plumbing, etc.

Sources: B.L. Abbi and Singh . "Post-Green Revolution Rural Punjab: A Profile of Economic and Socio-Cultural Change (1965-1995)".

and rich peasants as the dominant peasantry in the state. A significant feature of the agrarian society in Punjab is the numerical preponderance of Jat Sikhs in rural areas. Scheduled Castes form what is called the agricultural proletariat or labour force.

The Green Revolution also brought changes in lifestyle. Aspirations increased—there was demand for better education for children, better housing and better consumer goods. The traditional 'joint family' system was gradually replaced by the 'nuclear family'.

Politics also changed. There was a gradual shift of power from the urban elite to the rural elite. The Jat Sikhs became the dominant political group and as a result, development of agriculture became the top priority of every successive government. Supply of agricultural inputs at cheaper rates became a core demand. In order to relieve farmers from moneylenders, co-operative societies and commercial banks were established in large numbers to provide agricultural credit to the farming community. As agriculture became modernised, electricity for agricultural purpose was required at cheap rates for long hours. Similarly, fertilisers and pesticides were also

required to be supplied at cheap rates. Thus, successive governments responded by granting subsidies.

The impact of the Green Revolution differed through the regions of Punjab. The Doaba region saw a sizeable immigration of Sikhs to England, United States and Canada. Money remittances from overseas communities were used by the Jat Sikh farmers in the Doaba to improve their houses, increase lands and to buy machines. Recruitment in the army has always been an important adjunct to the agricultural economy. However, the trend of supplementing agricultural income from other sources was unevenly spread through the different regions. The Doaba region was foremost in this trend, followed by Majha and, only a part of the Malwa region, like the districts of Ludhiana and Patiala. One area where the impact of the Green Revolution was least felt was the so-called Kandi region (the area of the Himalayan foothills). Until today, the Kandi belt continues to remain relatively backward socially and economically.

The Green Revolution technology worked very well until the beginning of the 1980s. But subsequently agriculture began to show signs of fatigue. Productivity slowed, and stagnation set in. PAU



estimates show that on an average the Punjab farmer achieved 75 percent of the achievable potential yields of rice and wheat with the currently available technology (PAU, 1998).

As union and state government support to agriculture has declined, the present cropping pattern and production system seems to be economically unsustainable. Additionally, the Green Revolution technology has put great pressure on the ecological system, leading to a fall in the level of the ground water table, and soil depletion. Thus, the initial prosperity that the peasantry achieved is at this time diminishing at a very rapid rate. Punjab now requires new technology to make the present crops more profitable, as well as ecologically sustainable.

Box 2.4 presents a case study on the impact of the Green Revolution on rural Punjab by Abbi and Singh prepared in 1997.

### **Peasant Movement in Punjab**

A distinct period of peasant activism was noticed in the 1960s and the 1970s in different parts of the state. However, the roots of peasant unrest stretch far beyond Independence. In fact, the Punjab peasantry has always contributed in important ways to the present social and political structure. Prior to Independence, the most influential ideology of the peasants was Sikhism. Sikhism, with its notions of equality and austerity, appealed to poorer sections, particularly the farmers. The notion of martyrdom, as exemplified by the various Gurus, occupies an important position in Sikh philosophy. The cult of the hero has always been popular and heroes such as Chandrashekhar Azad, Bhagat Singh and their comrades inspired many.

This culture of socially activist rebel-heroes encouraged the growth of militant groups such as the Kirtis and Akalis and provided support to peasant/tenant protests. Starting in 1935 there was

a series of strikes and agitations by tenants, which were supported by the communists. These peaked with the Kisan demonstration at Amritsar in July 1938. As a result, the British and the Unionist Party government of Punjab were forced to accede to their demand of cancellation of debts of small farmers and led to land revenue being replaced by income tax.

The significant peasant struggles, both during the pre-Independence and post-Independence periods were conducted under the leadership of the United Communist Party of India (CPI) which in the early 1960s split into the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India, Marxist CPI(M). Both parties formed separate organisations of agricultural labourers on a nationwide basis. Hence was born the *All India Organisation of Agricultural Labour*, which was named Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Union by the CPI and the Dehati Khet Mazdoor Union by the CPI (M).

This was followed by the formation of the Radical Peasant Union, which later became known as the Naxalite movement under the leadership of the Communist Party of India–Marxist-Leninist CPI (M).

The formation of an independent agricultural labour organisation was a distinct departure from the earlier peasant organisations, which were confined to the concerns of the land-owning peasantry. The combined effect of pre-Independence peasant movements, and the early phase of the peasant movements in the 1950s, was successful in ensuring proprietary rights to the occupancy tenants but it did not make any significant difference to the status of the tenants-at-will and agricultural labourers. In fact, the condition of the tenants-at-will worsened in the early 1950s as landlords took to massive eviction. The woes of the tenants-at-will remained largely unaddressed.

Immediately after Independence and after the Partition of Punjab in 1947, there arose the issue



of the *Abad Kars* (agricultural workers/owners of small land holdings). This was closely linked with the land allotment policy of the Punjab Government. After the initial problems of rehabilitation of the peasants who had migrated from Pakistan, the attendant problems of settlement in different phases with temporary allotment, quasi permanent allotment and permanent allotment left only the inferior lands in the river beds of Sutlej and Ravi at the central government's disposal. These lands were transferred to the government of Punjab in the early 1960s, with the directive that these lands were to be distributed among the landless harijans, landless tenants and other poor cultivators. The Punjab Government, on the other hand, adopted a policy of open auction of evacuee lands, which resulted in large chunks of land being grabbed by influential people, and the *Abad Kars* were evicted.

Talib's observations are noteworthy here. He states that the poor tillers could not mobilise the requisite resources to compete with those who were rich and better connected who took away the land. In addition, these affluent sections had the goodwill and patronage of the auctioning officers on their side. As a result, the poor and needy who usually depended on agricultural loans were deprived of the opportunity to purchase their lands. Thus, the result of the open auction led to the uprooting of the actual tillers of the land. The cherished ideology of providing "land to the landless tillers" was thus largely overthrown. (*Ibid*, Desai, A.R, pp. 493-94).

This led to a confrontation between the tenant *Abad Kars* and government officials in the river bed areas along the Sutlej. The centre of the agitation was Nakodar tehsil of Jalandhar district. Other major centres of agitation were in the district of Ludhiana and in Kot Isse Khan in Zira tehsil of Ferozpur district. These struggles were commonly known as *Abad Kar* struggles and were conducted under the aegis of the Joint Action Committee of

the Kisan Sabha and Mazdoor Sabha. Rai Sikhs and Scheduled Castes made up the cadres of these movements at the grassroots. The Joint Action Committee undertook massive mobilisation of affected and deprived sections and highlighted the following demands:

- Spot verification of occupants of land through *Girdawari*.
- Right of ownership of land occupied by *Abad Kars* up to 5 acres per family.
- Lands occupied by *Abad Kars* not to be given to soldiers.

This mobilisation forced the Punjab Government to ensure the property rights of these small occupants of rural evacuee lands with the pre-conditions that the *Abad Kar* should be in continuous and undisputed occupation since 1976 Rabi crop; and, such a person should not own more than five ordinary acres inclusive of his own land [e.f. Desai, AR, pp. 494-495].

Thus, only a nominal element of social justice was rendered to the landless.

Another significant achievement of the Kisan Sabha during the 1950s and 1960s was the Anti-Betterment Levy agitation, which ultimately led to the non-payment of the Betterment Levy all over Punjab, including the present Punjab and Haryana. Talib rightly remarks that this was one of the most broad-based struggles in the post-independence years.

When capitalism arrived in Punjab's agriculture, caste barriers became diluted but class polarities sharpened. In the rural areas there emerged a clear divide between the capitalist farmers and rich peasants on the one hand, and agricultural labourers on the other. This social milieu contributed in important ways to the growth of extremist movements.



## **Naxalite Movement in Punjab**

Far away from Punjab, in the village of Naxalbari in Alipurduar district of West Bengal, the famous Naxalite movement which took its name from this village. This movement spread over many parts of India, including Punjab where it spread widely through cities, universities, villages and farmer organisations.

Three phases may be discerned in the Naxalite movement in Punjab. These are:

- (1) Mass struggles, which were organised up to 1969.
- (2) Implementation of 'annihilation of class enemies' line
- (3) Withdrawal of 'annihilation line' and adoption of militant agitations.

The Naxalites organised peasants according to the above objectives by means of forcible harvesting of crops, seizure of landholdings of the landlords and demand for an increase in wages of agricultural workers. Naxalites organised three militant mass struggles. However, their gains could not be sustained.

The first among these struggles was organised at Bhikhi-Samaon in Bathinda (now Mansa) district. On December 8, 1968, hundreds arrived in Samaon and the land of the rich landlords was occupied by hoisting red flags in the fields. The seizure was mainly symbolic in character.

The second struggle involved the organisation of workers employed by the Birla Farm. The Punjab Government had leased 1,000 acres of land to the Birlas near Rup Nagar for seed multiplication. The Naxalites organised farm labourers who went on strike on April 10, 1969 demanding higher wages. The farm management comprising at landlords, large farmers and absentee landlords used the police, as well as local chieftains to end these strikes. After the Naxalites attacked the police station at Chamkaur

Sahib on April 30, 1969, the police began to crack down much more strongly on strikers.

The last mass struggle took place at Kila Hakima in Sangrur district in June 1969. Unlike the Bhikhi-Samaon struggle, at Kila Hakima, the Naxalites remained in the village or in the surrounding areas to sustain the seizure of land. Confronted with the large police force that was sent to the area, they burnt farm buildings. At this stage, the Ghadar Party, the Babbar Akalis and the Red Communists were the inspiration of the Naxalite leaders.

Thus, the major targets of the Naxalite attacks were the big landlords and moneylenders, who were identified as the class enemy. Naxalites also attacked police informers who were instrumental in the arrest of their comrades. The districts of Jalandhar and Kapurthala saw significant Naxalite activity.

Most of the Naxals were university students and hostels were their natural hiding places. The Naxalite-led movements, however began to wane after 1981, when a different movement began to grow, which far outshaded the Naxalite agitations. This was the rise of militancy.

The Naxalite movement in Punjab failed to focus on the fundamental concerns of all agricultural labourers, and remained confined instead to the demands of the marginal and small peasants. It was only later that the Naxals took up more universal concerns of the land-owning peasantry such as remunerative prices for agricultural produce, reduction of electricity tariff and the abolition of indebtedness.

There were sub-groups within the Naxalite movement. One of these was the Kirti Kisan Union, which had a strong base in the lower peasantry, particularly in the Doab region. The KKI initially organised the Kala Sangathan struggle against the landlords in the Doaba. Later, it shifted the focus



of its struggle to the issue of remunerative prices and took up specific problems raised by the capitalist transition in Punjab agriculture.

The Naxalite movement in Punjab, unlike its counterparts in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, failed to focus strongly enough on the agricultural labourer, although in the aftermath of the Green Revolution, during the 1970s, the CPI and CPI(M) did carry out several successful struggles on the question of agricultural labourers' wages.

The massive influx of migrant labourers to Punjab from the rest of India, that began from the 1960s severely affected the movement and wage rates of local agricultural labourers. Local farmers preferred to employ migrant labour, as it was cheaper and these labourers worked longer hours. Studies conducted during the 1970s and early 1980s pointed to simmering discontent among local agricultural labourers. The Left parties were unable to lead local and migrant labourers on the wage issue. Subsequently, militancy dealt a body blow to the Left in Punjab and buried any future mobilisation of agricultural labourers.

### **Militancy in Punjab: An Overview**

Militancy has left an indelible mark on Punjab and has had drastic social, political and economic consequences. After Partition, it was militancy that once again revived communal identities as masses were mobilised to protect the Sikh identity and establish its difference from Hindus.

### **Rise of Militancy**

Militancy in Punjab had its origin in several social, historical, religious, political, cultural, riparian and linguistic factors, combined with simmering frustrations and feelings of identity crisis. It would be inaccurate to attribute the rise of terrorism only to economic factors.

The dominant theme that unites all these explanations is the emerging centrality of Sikh religion and Sikh identity. Sikh identity, as a separate identity, was an idea used by communal forces to propagate ideas that all Sikhs should have common social, economic and political interests and, should therefore unite against the State which was seen as representing the interest of the Hindu majority. Religion was manipulated to suit the political ambitions of a few. Thus, "exploitation of religion for political gains has become a permanent feature of our political system, posing a serious threat not only to the national unity, but also to the purity of religion and sanctity of religious places."<sup>2</sup>

Jurgensmeyer's<sup>3</sup> explanation that militancy drew on a religious sanction for violence in times of perceived threat is also significant. He says the perceptions of those who participated in militancy in the name of religion were crucial. In his opinion, Sikh militants felt they were justified, to a certain extent, when they claimed that they acted as a result of religious conversions which, they felt were going on at this time, even while upholding notions of Indian secularism. He stressed that the militant movement in Punjab was an instance of a religious struggle emanating from a perceived threat and that religion was used to legitimise violence.

There are scholars who view economic and regional disparities as being the real cause for the rise of militancy. These explanations argue that although the Green Revolution was a success, it failed to provide sustainable and homogeneous development throughout the state. The effects of the Revolution also produced far reaching social changes. Environmentalist Vandana Shiva, an advocate of this argument says that the Green Revolution led to a destruction of the community and a consequent homogenising of social

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<sup>2</sup> Samiliddin, 1985

<sup>3</sup> Jurgensmeyer, 1988



relations, purely on a communal criteria. Thus an overriding concern with economic growth, with total disregard to environmental and social factors led to a collapse of the community, giving rise to a violent situation. Gupta (1992) is also of the view that the Green Revolution failed to distribute benefits equally and thus made communal mobilisation possible.

Other scholars believe that communal mobilisation among the Sikhs occurred as a result of the anxieties generated by the process of modernisation. Sikhs feared being assimilated into Hinduism (Bomwall, 1985). They feared that in the name of national integration, their identity would be submerged within that of the majority community.

In conclusion, it can be said that militancy grew from a growing distrust with the State and its initiatives. It also grew from a deep dissatisfaction with the perceived discriminatory policies practised by the government and a lack of a responsive political will to address the needs of the people. The only successful policy had been the Green Revolution and even this was riddled with problems. It had created a vast mass of restless, unemployed youth who now became the cadres for the militant movement.

### **Profile of Militants**

In the following section, a profile of militants based on various studies has been attempted.

#### ***Class and Caste Representation***

From the studies done by Puri and Judge (1999) and Ram Narayan Kumar (1997), it has been concluded that the largest number of militants was from the land-owning Jat Sikh sections of the peasantry. Puri and Judge's study indicates that two-thirds of the militants were from landless labourer and small farmer communities, 22 percent were middle farmers and a small percentage were rich farmers. The study of Satyapal Dang (1988),

however, contests the view that the majority of militants came from poor and middle peasant families. He states that a sizeable number of militants came from well-off, rich peasant landlord families. Many studies have shown that militancy was to a large extent, a middle class phenomenon.

#### ***Age-Wise Distribution***

A predominant majority (80 percent) of the militants were young, ranging usually from 14 to 25 years (Puri and Judge, 1999); about 15 percent were between 26 and 35 years; only 5 percent were above 35 years. In contrast, the study of Satyapal Dang (1988) reports that only 37.5 percent were below 25 years and the remaining 62.5 percent were above 25 years. Notwithstanding the age differences as shown in the studies, it can be concluded nevertheless that a sizeable proportion of militants were young.

#### ***Educational Status***

Studies show considerable variation in the educational qualifications of the militants. The study of Puri and Paramjit Singh shows that 24.15 percent of the militants were illiterate, 25.70 percent had acquired education up to the middle level and another 41.18 percent were matriculates, and only 8.5 percent had received education beyond the matriculation level. This indicated that on an average, militants had a low educational status. The study of Narayan Kumar confirms this.

However, variations are seen in Dang's study where 47.5 percent were illiterates, 5.5 percent were matriculates, and 47 percent had acquired higher education. Hence, militants seem to have received a fair amount of education.

#### ***Regional Distribution***

Macro-level figures on the incidence of militancy show that the majority of the militants were from the Majha region from the districts of Amritsar and Gurdaspur, which border Pakistan (Source: Police Department, Punjab Government).



### ***Motives for Joining Militancy***

Puri and Judge show that there existed wide disparities in factors that operated in the village and the speeches on political objectives and grievances of the Sikh community that were being articulated by Sikh leaders and spokesmen.

The available evidence questions both the government's definition of the problem as a secessionist movement, as well as the ideological interpretation given by leaders. The evidence also defied another prevalent notion that most of those who took to armed struggle joined as a consequence of police atrocities on them or on the members of their families.

The work of Jasbir Singh states that feelings of discrimination and alienation coupled with widespread unemployment among educated youth substantially contributed in pushing the youth towards militancy.

Most of the other studies, however, point to the need to assert the Sikh identity arising from religious and political discrimination and alienation from the State.

### **Towards Militancy – Tracing the Landmarks**

It is necessary to state the instance and events that led to this period of upheaval.

An important milestone in the road towards a more autonomous Punjab was the adoption of the Anandpur Sahib resolution in April 1973 by the Akali Party. In addition to demands for further autonomy, the resolution also demanded:

- Chandigarh as the capital of Punjab (with adequate compensation to Haryana to build a capital of its own).
- Readjustment of the state boundaries to include Punjabi-speaking areas of Haryana, Himachal and Rajasthan.

- Fairer allocation to Punjab of the waters of Ravi, Sutlej and Beas, to which it was the only Indian riparian state, including control over canal headworks and hydro-electric installations based on them.

For a long time the Anandpur Sahib resolution remained on the backburner. The Akali Party did confirm its commitment to this resolution at an annual conclave in Ludhiana, and when they came to power in the state in 1977, the case of re-allocation of river waters was submitted to the purview of the Supreme Court. However, the demand of the Anandpur Sahib resolution always hovered on the fringes of Punjab politics.

In the early 1980s, things started to change. The All India Sikh Student's Federation (AISSF) arrived on the political scene. Their determined demand for a ban on the sale of tobacco in 1981 led to a clash with some Hindu organisations demanding not only a ban on the sale of tobacco but also of liquor and meat. From then onwards, militancy entered its most violent phase.

Following the AISSF strike, a period of violence and killings was unleashed in Punjab. The instances and details of killings are too numerous to relate here. It included not just killings of police and militants, but killings of innocent civilians, large-scale killings during Operation Bluestar in Punjab, and many other anti-terrorist operations by both the army and police.

Militancy in Punjab came to an end after strong and effective intervention by the government from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. The determination of the political executive and its support to the police force was crucial, as was the leadership and valour shown by the police.

However, the undercurrent of this problem which thrives on various unseen linkages, both internal as well as external, are still strong. In fact, heavy recoveries of lethal explosives and weapons as



well as arrests of suspected terrorists during the last five years, indicate that efforts are afoot to revive militancy. Under these circumstances, the motivation and morale as well as up to date equipment of the police must be maintained to meet future challenges.

Certain basic lessons can be learnt from the period of militancy. Unresolved issues need to be taken up energetically. The state should be able to formulate and present policies that can create long, unhindered phases of development. Regional disparities must be addressed and the concerns of educated and unemployed youth must be taken into consideration. The state must be sensitive to communal identities while at the same time taking care not to allow these identities to be fanned by extremists.

## The Regions of Punjab

Punjab roughly forms a plain; however the shifting courses of rivers and various processes of denudation have resulted in variations in relief, drainage, soils, and vegetation. In addition, there are cultural variations and each region possesses a separate cultural identity of its own.

Culturally, Punjab can be divided into three regions—Majha, Doaba and Malwa. The rivers mark the boundaries of these regions. Over time, each region has metamorphosed into distinct regions, separate in their physical environment, economic structure, social organisation and cultural pattern. Therefore, each region is also called a 'folk region.' Though there exist inter-regional differences, within regions there is a uniformity in geography, climate, vegetation, soils, drainage, livelihood and cultural environment.

### Majha

Also called the 'Upper Bari Doab', this region is surrounded by three rivers, Ravi in the west, Beas in the east and Sutlej in the south. It consists of the districts of Amritsar and Gurdaspur. To the west of

the region lies Pakistan, with Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts forming a long international boundary. It has an area of 8658 square kilometres, 17.17% of the total area of Punjab. Majha is one-fourth the size of Malwa and slightly smaller than Doaba.

Majha is the most densely populated region in Punjab. According to the 2001 Census, the average density of population of the region is 597 persons per square Km. Though constituting only 17 percent of the area of Punjab, Majha contributes around 21 percent of the population to the state (Census 2001). Amritsar has the largest population—12.65 percent of the total population of the state. A majority of the people of the region live in villages. Around 25 percent of the people in Gurdaspur district and 40 percent of the people of Amritsar district live in towns (Census 2001). Amritsar is the second largest city of Punjab, after Ludhiana, and has recently become a city of over a million people (Census 2001).

Amritsar is the Mecca of Sikhism and as expected, Sikhs constitute 75.63 percent of the total population of the district. Also, the district is home to 50 percent of the Christian population of Punjab. Majha region as a whole has 70 percent of the total Christian population of the state. The town of Qadian is the headquarters of the Shia sect of Muslims in India. People in Majha speak the Majha dialect, which is similar to the Doabi dialect.

Majha has a typical continental climate with hot summers and cold winters. Maximum temperature during summers ranges between 40 and 45 degrees Celsius. Winters are severe, with the temperature at times, going below 0 degree Celsius. The region receives a moderate rainfall of 50 cm per year. Part of this rainfall is caused by the western disturbances, which is good for the rabi, or winter crops.

Vegetation follows relief and rainfall patterns. It becomes gradually thin as one moves westwards



in the region. Pathankot tehsil has the maximum vegetation cover with its chirpine forests. However, these are depleting over the years. Bamboo, mulberry and khair trees can be found in low altitude areas. Almost the whole of Amritsar district and southwestern Gurdaspur have semi dry deciduous vegetation. Eucalyptus is omnipresent. Like the rest of Punjab, Majha is poor in minerals. However, the region is endowed with hydroelectric potential and a number of powerhouses constructed on the Upper Bari Doab canal provide power to the state. A dam on the river Ravi is currently under construction.

The presence of flat lands, fertile clay loamy soil, extensive irrigation from canals and tubewells, coupled with the hardworking people of Majha have made this region agriculturally prosperous. The land is intensively sown and irrigated. In fact, about three-fourths of the net cultivated area is sown more than once a year. Wheat, rice and sugarcane are the important crops here. As far as industry is concerned, about 17.3 percent of registered working factories are found in Majha. Important industries include sugar, cotton, wool and textiles.

### **Doaba**

The tract of land between the rivers Beas and Sutlej, including the districts of Hoshiarpur, Nawanshehar, Kapurthala, and parts of Fazilka, Jalandhar and Gurdaspur, is a cultural buffer zone, where the influences of Majha and Malwa mingle. This region is called the Doaba or the Bist Doaba region. It is separated from Himachal Pradesh by the Shivaliks. It is triangular in shape, with its base at the Himachal border, and apex on the Beas-Sutlej confluence. It has an area of 8844 square kilometres, 17.6 percent of the total area of Punjab. There is a *choe* ridden (ravine-ridden) belt in the area bordered by the Shivaliks called the *Kandi* area. This area is a *bhabhar*, or a piedmont plain, lying at the foothills of the Shivaliks and formed by the coalescence of various alluvial fans resulting from the deposition of sediments by various *choe*

at the foothills. The two rivers, Sutlej and Beas along with two other seasonal streams provide drainage to the region. Besides these, the Kandi region is full of seasonal streams.

Doaba has a continental climate. Temperature in summers ranges from 30 to 32 degrees Celsius while the maximum can go up to 45 degrees Celsius. Winters are moderately cold with normal temperatures falling between 10 and 15 degrees Celsius. Loo in the summers and frost in the winters are common features. Clay loams are found in Doaba, which turn to sandy loam as one moves to the eastern part of the region. In the extreme east, the soil becomes pebbly.

Doaba is a densely populated region, accounting for 19.64 percent of the population of Punjab (2001). Average density of population was 465 persons per square kilometre in 1991, which increased to 539 persons (Census 2001). Jalandhar has the second highest population density in the state, coming second to Ludhiana in Malwa. The eastern parts of Hoshiarpur and Nawanshehar have a low population density because these regions have *choe*-ridden hilly tracts. Sikhs do not predominate in the Doaba region. In 1991, there were 44% Sikhs in Jalandhar and 42% in Hoshiarpur district.

The dialect of the region is distinct and so is its cultural identity, which draws heavily on the folk traditions of Punjab. The dialect of the region was heavily influenced by the Persian reign during the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The script was originally Persian-Arabic (*Shahmukhi*) and was later changed to *Gurmukhi* by one of the Gurus. Doabi is actually the most common dialect spoken. The Doabis are adventurous people and migrate all over the world.

Doaba has a well-developed agriculture with large-scale irrigation facilities by tubewells. In fact, tubewells provide around 90 percent of the total irrigation. Bist Doab also provides canal irrigation. Wheat, rice, maize, potatoes and sugarcane are





*Gidha; the women folk dance of Punjab*

the major crops grown in the area. Maize was traditionally the main crop although in recent decades the farmers have taken to the cultivation of wheat, sunflower and other cash crops. The region is rich in water power. The Pong dam on the river Beas and various powerhouses on the Mukerian Hydrel Canal provide power to the region. Major industries include cotton textiles, sugar, leather and paper. Jalandhar is famous for sports goods production. Doaba has the highest road density of all the regions in Punjab.

### **Malwa**

The area south of the river Sutlej is called Malwa. The name has its source from a clan called Molosis (sometimes written as Malawis in ancient works) who once ruled this area. Malwa constitutes 11 districts of Punjab, and is thus, the largest region of the state. The Jat landlords, who, it might be said, control the political pulse of Punjab, dominate this region. Malwa is very representative of Punjabi folk traditions. The people of the region speak the Malwa dialect, which is similar to Punjabi.

Malwa is surrounded by the river Sutlej in the north, the river Ghaggar in the south, the Shivalik Hills in

the east and Pakistan in the west. Malwa comprises two-thirds of the total area of Punjab and is vast and undulating. The eastern parts of Rup Nagar are uneven and hilly, while the southwestern parts are studded with sand dunes.

Malwa is climatically different from Majha and Doaba and is comparatively hot, dry and arid. Aridity increases as one goes south-westwards. Summers are hot, with the mean temperature in Ludhiana being 32.5 degrees Celsius, while the mean temperature in winter is 14.1 degrees Celsius. Maximum temperature goes up to 49 degrees Celsius in summers. Monsoons bring in some respite. Rainfall decreases west and south-westwards. The average rainfall of Ludhiana is 68 cm and for Abohar it is 26.9 cm.

Compared to Majha and Doaba, Malwa is sparsely populated. Although it covers 65.2 percent area of the state, it is home to only 59.07 percent of the population (Census 2001). Population density has increased from 365 (1991) to 436 (2001) persons per squares km. Ludhiana is the most populated district of Malwa, accounting for 12.48 percent of the population of the state. Ludhiana was the city



in Punjab with a population of a million in 1991 and still has the highest population amongst all the other districts of Punjab. The south-western parts of Malwa are very sparsely populated.

Malwa has a preponderance of Sikh population with the highest percentage of Sikh population recorded in Faridkot. The people of this region speak Malwa, which can be called a dialect of Punjabi.

Malwa does not have any mineral wealth. Thermal power forms the chief source of power. It is obtained from the two coal-based power plants at Rup Nagar and Bathinda. In Rup Nagar district, the Nangal Hydrel Channel has two powerhouses, which produce hydro-electricity.

Agriculture is the main occupation in Malwa. In the eastern districts of Malwa, there is good quality

soil; excellent irrigation from tubewells and canals is available; and holdings are comparatively small. Agriculture is intensively practised here. However, in the south-western part of the state, which has a semi-arid climate, frequent occurrence of sand dunes, slightly undulating topography, canal irrigation, sandy loam soils and large holdings, extensive and moderately intensive farming is practised. Important crops include wheat, rice, cotton, pulses, oilseeds, bajra and sugarcane. Irrigation is the mainstay of agriculture in Malwa as the climate is semi-arid and there is always a water deficit, which requires an expansion of irrigation facilities.

Malwa has the largest network of canal irrigation in Punjab, although the chief source of irrigation is tube wells. Cotton, sugar and paper are the main industries of the region.



