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What we did was very wrong

(English Translation of a Punjabi poem written on 16-9-91 by the well known Punjabi poet and writer Santokh Singh Dheer- a member of the C.P.I.)

It was a big blunder on our part
to have killed the czar
Because thereafter we ourselves
had to become czars!
Czars would desire
Sun should rise
on their bidding!
When we took over
We told the sun to seek
our permission before rising!
And to ask us as
to how much to shine!
The Czar's Sword
Hanging from a peg
was decorating the
house of executions
we took it off the peg!
Like an Indian bride
we decorated the
House of executions with
Bright Red colours!
we committed a big mistake
in killing the czar
Because thereafter we ourselves
had to become Czars!

Czars left the scene
Diamonds which studded their crowns
became sad
We had to console these diamonds
As crowns were no longer there,
We fitted these diamonds
into our shoes!
Pride-Ego
Nay, all the five vices
were in sorrow
The czars had gone
We consoled all the five.
And then absorbed them
in our own blood arteries.
We committed a big mistake
in killing the czar
Because thereafter
we ourselves had to become czars.

(Translated from Punjabi in
Nawan Zamana by Satya Pal Dang)

Ranking game rankles

Punjab condition none too rosy

by Mohan Guruswamy

THERE is something not quite right about newspapers and magazines giving awards to states as if it were a beauty contest. It is the job of the media to inform and even make comment leaving the judging of performance to the people. Besides it is downright unethical if the awards are dished out just before the somewhat less objectively chosen state went to the polls.

This is what India Today has done in the case of Punjab when it ranked it as first among Indian states. To compound this the President of India was the one who handed over the award lending it an official imprimatur. This is indeed unfortunate and it is best that constitutional authorities like the President who should be well above partisan politics kept away from such beauty parades where the criterion can only be subjective.

If the governance of a state has been good the people of that state have seldom failed to reward the ruling party, as we see in the case of West Bengal, which has posted the highest growth in incomes over the last decade. It was in another such India Today beauty contest that the writer VS Naipaul castigated Marxism for ruining West Bengal, when the facts are quite contrary to that. There is about as much Marxism in West Bengal as there is in Punjab, thank God for that, as the practice of Marxist orthodoxy is not possible under our constitutional arrangements.

There can be no denying that with Rs 30,701 Punjab has the highest per capita income among the states in India in 2004-5. There are many reasons for this. But most notable is the fact that 85.15 per cent of all land in Punjab is arable with 89.72 per cent of it with irrigation. More than half of this is due to the huge central government projects, Bhakra Nangal being the most notable among them.

Equally notable is the fact that Punjab has benefited by a disproportionately large recruitment into the armed and paramilitary forces giving a good many rural families in the state a second stream of income.

The fact is that Punjab has had the highest per capita income in India since 1950. But what should cause

concern is the fact that this growth rate has now slowed down considerably. In each of the last five years Punjab's growth has been well below the national growth rate.

Even if just the performance of the financial year gone by was employed as the criterion, the growth was 5.9 per cent at 1993-94 prices as opposed to the national average of 7.7 per cent. Surely this should weigh as much as the actual placing when what purports to be recognition for good governance is handed out by the President of India?

While the growth of income is probably the best indicator of the success of a government, there are several other criteria that need to be considered. It has often been said that prosperity is the best contraceptive. But this is apparently not so in the Punjab. With the highest per capita income in the country one would have thought Punjab's population growth ranking would have been commensurate with its income. That honour must go to the state with the second biggest per capita income, Kerala. The population growth in Kerala was a mere 1.11 per cent as opposed to Punjab's 1.85 per cent. As a matter of fact all the other South Indian states and West Bengal are better than Punjab in this regard.

Compounded to this is the fact that the sex ratio in Punjab is also a none too happy one. It was 874/1000 in 2001 having dropped from 882/1000 in 1991. Only Haryana had a worse performance than this.

Things all over the country have improved somewhat when the ratio moved upwards from 927/1000 to 933/1000 between 1991-2001. Every other day there are harrowing tales in the media about aborted female fetuses being recovered in Punjab and while there is no accurate data available on this it would seem that in terms of female infanticides Punjab should rank quite high.

Another related statistic that should cause concern is the relatively high infant mortality rate (IMR). It was 57/1000 as opposed to Kerala's 11/1000 in 2003. But the more important point is that in the decade ending 2003 Kerala IMR declined by

30.1 per cent while the decline in Punjab was by just 7.3 per cent.

Mind you the per capita incomes of both these states are pretty close. But what makes Punjab's performance truly unacceptable is that it is worse than states like West Bengal (49) and neighbouring Himachal Pradesh (36) which come nowhere close to it in the per capita income rankings.

Similarly even in terms of average life expectancy Punjab rates lower than Kerala by as much as three years.

If the rankings are to measure how developed the states are then one of the major factors that need to be given prominence is the female literacy rate. It has a high degree of relevance due to the linkages it has to child health,

If good governance is considered to be a factor, Punjab can hardly be considered to be among the top performers

nutrition and primary education.

The female literacy rate in Punjab was 63.55 per cent a good 14 per cent below that of Kerala. The decadal change in female literacy rate for Punjab was only around 13.14 per cent and this was lower than the country's average of 14.39 per cent. This and the adverse sex ratio should be considered a huge demerit when judging standards of governance. When it comes to the number of students in primary and secondary schools Punjab's performance is truly shocking. It is 137 per 1000 population, whereas the national average is 181.

In fact, school enrolment in Punjab is the lowest in India. It is little wonder then that in terms of the composite Human Development Index too Punjab has not done well. Between 1981 and 2001 Kerala improved by 0.138 to 0.638, while Punjab moved up by just 0.125 to 0.537. The whole country during the same period moved up by 0.160 to 0.472.

Given the abundance of irrigation and the willingness of the Punjab farmer to innovate, Punjab has for long been one of the main granaries of India. Its performance in agriculture has always been spectacular, but we must not forget that almost 90 per cent of agricultural land is irrigated and there now seems little prospect of extending that further.

Therefore, the answer lies in a spectacular rise in farm productivity. Unfortunately that has not happened, due to a variety of factors, many of which are beyond the control of the state government.

But there are factors that lie well within the influence of the state government, and here the effort in Punjab has been found wanting. The annual percentage industrial output growth rate for the period from 1993-94 to 2003-04 was 4.97 per cent for Punjab while the all India growth rates stood at 6.19 per cent. Worse is the trend in industrial value addition. It has stubbornly remained at 2.9 per cent of the national total.

The real answer to this riddle can be gleaned from the sluggish implementation of investment plans in general. Against the national implementation ratio of 38.1, Punjab's is 28.3. Its share of the total national investment in projects in 2004 was just 1.3 per cent of the Rs 20,74,894 crores invested in projects in India. As a matter of fact Punjab comes last in the list of the larger states with an investment of just Rs 27,769 crores.

The performance of Punjab has not been a particularly good one and the people of Punjab have much to be dissatisfied about. We have no problem with it being chosen first in a beauty contest where income is the sole criterion, but if good governance is considered to be a factor, Punjab can hardly be considered to be among the top performers.

The elections in Punjab are due in a few months and people will judge the performance of its government during the last few years. The only thing going for the Congress Party is that the choice is between them and the Akali/BJP alliance. Between the devil and the deep sea! ■