

# ThePrint

## **Punjab's frustration & anger is rooted in its steep decline, now visible in farmers' protests**

*Reading the 'Writings on the Wall', Shekhar Gupta has foreseen Punjab's angry revolt from its descent into complacent, lazy, decadent trance of perpetual balle-balle.*

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Punjab is in the headlines, on prime time and on top of our minds now, with its farmers' protests. The issues, frustrations and anger in Punjab are deep set. You can easily sense them if you have your ear to the ground and eyes on Writings on the Wall. Which, incidentally, is also the name of an occasional series I write travelling across the country.

This is one of the two pieces in a series of Writings on The Wall I wrote from Punjab during the 2014 general elections. Do check it out to see what I got right or wrong. I will share the other parts over the next couple of days.

### **Mind your language**

It can break your heart to tell the story of the terminal decline of a state you so love, where you grew up and then cut your teeth as a reporter.

But you also can't overlook the dire writings on the wall as Punjab approaches the polling date for its 13 Lok Sabha seats. Particularly if you can read the two languages, Punjabi and English, as written here. Punjabi, because what should be India's most globalised state is actually trapped in the politics of localitis. If you're blindfolded and left on a street here, you might find it impossible to say where you were, unless you were able to read Punjabi. The Punjabification of the state's walls, signboards, milestones, is now total. But you might still have a chance if you spotted something written in English, even if it is the name of a restaurant, bar or banquet hall.

You will take a minute figuring out what the "burgars" and "nudles" painted on so many fast-food shops mean, or why Lily is always spelt "Lilly", whether it be the name of a restaurant in Phagwara or a beauty parlour in Bathinda. Or what a prominent, old and serious bookshop in Bathinda, such a famed centre of "learning", means when its signboard lists "fictions" and children's books along with military history as its most important offerings.

If you haven't figured out already that this, indeed, is Singh's English and you must be in Punjab (disclosure: I passed my class VI from Bathinda's Mahavir Sanatan Dharam Public School in 1966 and, to that extent, my formal education too was "via Bathinda", literally, if not metaphorically), look for other pointers. Which other state would offer you a highway restaurant

called Burger Girl? That in a state which snaps viciously at its neighbour Haryana's heels for the worst female/male ratio (Punjab's was 895 to Haryana's 879 in the 2011 Census).

### **Figures don't lie**

There are three ways to understand the gradient and pace of Punjab's slide. One, just the plain figures and statistics. You ask any Indian to name the richest state in the country. Chances are that the answer will be Punjab. Which was true for decades. But now it is the fifth, after Haryana, Maharashtra and, of course, mini-states like Goa and Delhi.

Its school dropout rate is among the highest in the country. For two decades now, its economic growth rate has trailed the national average (1994-2002, 4.32 per cent compared to the national 6.16, 6.61 versus 7.95 in 2002-11). A Washington-based Cato Institute study by Swaminathan Anklesaria Aiyar finds even a decline in the state's economic freedom index. Between 2005 and 2011, it slipped from sixth in the national rankings to 12th.

A Pratham study showed that in 2007, nearly half of all class III children in Punjab could not read class I texts, and half of all class V students could not solve a three digit by one division problem. According to the state government's own economic survey, medical services are actually declining in terms of hospital beds per thousand population. That also explains the rage of anti-incumbency against the Akali-BJP government.

Punjab's traditional industries, textiles, foundries, are all dying.

In the course of a 35-minute helicopter ride from Ludhiana to Bathinda, Sukhbir Singh Badal pointed out how you cannot find even a foot of land that is either not cultivated (at the moment, actually, gleaming like bronzed, 14-karat gold with ripe wheat), or inhabited. There is no land left in Punjab to employ more people, but through the entire wide landscape, in what is traditionally India's most fertile and prosperous region, the Doaba (between rivers Sutlej and Beas), you do not spot any industry either. And agriculture can't grow much more unless the farmer is persuaded to toss out his entrepreneurial laziness and move out of the self-destructive wheat/paddy cycle.

Even there, it is a matter of a harvest or two before Madhya Pradesh starts procuring more wheat than Punjab, having already left Haryana behind. This is just when Punjab should have been reaping a well-deserved peace dividend after a bloody decade stolen by terror.

### **A self-destructive chill**

It is not my case that there has been no peace dividend for Punjab. Having lived through that decade of mayhem, the Blue Star and Black Thunder weeks in Amritsar, the humiliation of proving your identity to "sentries" at militant "checkposts" on Tarn Taran roads at night, and once, being the only passenger in the so-called Flying Mail to Delhi, which ran at 15 km an hour because of the fear of bombs, I can see a turnaround as dramatic as only something purely Punjabi can be. But a closer look, particularly if you can read writings on the wall between the lines, in Gurmukhi and Singh's English, and you'd know that Punjab isn't a state in a virtuous boom. It has lapsed, instead, into a self-destructive chill.

So what's wrong with being chilled? The challenge lies in translating the meaning of chill into Punjabi, or rather the Punjabi state of mind. It is not a state of cool, but some kind of frenzy. Yet, it is lazy, even somnolent and sterile, rather than the usual hyper-energetic and virile Punjabi stereotype. It is a tired, once-wealthy state, living off its past riches, reputation and residual hormones. Today, it boasts among the largest percentage of drug addicts in the country. You know his political motives but the Congress party's Ludhiana candidate, Ravneet Singh Bittu (anybody who matters in Punjab has a nickname now, Satinder Singh Satta, Balbir Singh Bittu, Bunty Romana, Satnam Singh Shunty and so on) has a point when he tells you that only two businesses open early in the morning in Punjab — liquor and drugs. Scrawny, hollow-eyed customers are already lined up.

But there is a sense of chill alright. If liberal sociologists around the world fret over the threat of a rising, Westernised monoculture, in India it could be a Punjabiified one. Weddings, rituals, celebrations, music, food and dressing around the country are acquiring a baroque Punjabi flavour. And Punjabis are celebrating because they think they have arrived. After a long gap, there is a revival of the Punjabi film industry. And here are some recent hits: *Jatt & Juliet*, *Carry On Jatta* and, right at this moment, competing with election graffiti, *Jatt James Bond*.

Each one is a celebration of Punjabi male invincibility, usually featuring a *pind* (village) bumpkin with a heart of gold and an NRI beauty who ends up inevitably and gratefully in her rightful place — the Jatt hero's lap. How do I describe this chill? My favourite hoarding is found on an Amritsar crossroad, offering an all-you-can-eat kitty party lunch for Rs 750 per head. It shows six beautifully turned out Punjabi women, shades on their blow-dried heads at a kitty, of course, but each talking on her mobile phone.

While the rest of the country has moved on, Punjab has become a prisoner of its boisterous old stereotype but has, meanwhile, forgotten its entrepreneurial energy, its competitive spirit. Its young are dropping out of school and hitting drugs or liquor or making a desperate dash for the West, not for tech, banking, management or medical pursuits, as their countrymen elsewhere do, but mostly for suboptimal jobs like driving trucks and taxis or chopping onions in the backrooms of desi restaurants. Bhagwant Mann, Punjab's comedy star and the AAP candidate from Sangrur (who went on to become a two-time MP; more about him in a bit), says, in his own devastating deadpan style: "In Amreeka and Kanada, sir, they are grateful to us Punjabis. It is because of us that they have the best qualified taxi drivers in the world, MBBS, MA, PhD."

He turns the knife. "So the 'goras' say, *balle-balle*. Why did you send us back if all of you wanted to come here? And why did that silly Bhagat Singh have to die at just 23?" Punjab today has declined so badly, he says, that "we cannot even look our martyrs' statues in the eye". Punjab lost its national stature in sports long ago. Much smaller Haryana, which used to be the most backward part of old Punjab, now wins more than half of all Indian medals in global competitions. Punjab almost never registers its presence. It once dominated the armed forces. Today, most recruitment rallies go back with vacancies, the young either disinclined or sadly, physically inadequate. Would you believe that?

One of India's and the world's great living sporting idols (at the time, in 2014) is Balbir Singh, a triple Olympic gold medallist in hockey, coach and manager of the last Indian team to win the World Cup (Kuala Lumpur, 1975), and listed by the IOC among the 16 greatest Olympic icons ever, alongside the likes of Jesse Owens and Carl Lewis. At 89, his passion for sport, for the flag and for winning, is the way it should always be for a Punjabi, particularly an ageless Jat. But ask him about Punjab's fall in sports and his eyes misted over: "*Sab khatam kar diya ji drugs ney. Ab yeh woh Punjab ka youth nahin hai. Woh toh khokhla (hollow) ho gaya.*"

That is why it is tough to find a contemporary synonym for chill in Punjabi. Because it is a new, very un-Punjabi state of complacent, lazy, decadent trance of perpetual *balle-balle*. Now you can try translating it back into English.

### **There's an aeroplane on my roof**

To understand this better, drive on the GT Road generally southeast from Amritsar, past the richest districts of Punjab, Phagwara, Jalandhar and Ludhiana, and keep your eyes on the walls.

The factories are dying, mostly empty shells now, a bit like what you see as you drive out of Kolkata along the Hooghly. As you approach Ludhiana, you also see to your right something you are unlikely to see in a boom state; not even, in fact, in Raipur or Ranchi: Emptied, bankrupted shopping malls and many others abandoned half-built. But you also see many gleaming new constructions, some looking like fortresses, Indian or Moroccan, some like European mansions, all with fancy names and a common purpose: Partying, mostly at weddings.

This is a cut above your usual banquet hall. In Punjab, these are called, simply, palaces: 'My wedding is in the seventh palace to the right on the highway, the one that looks like a Swiss chalet', is a likely set of directions. Of course, you may also find one called Jurasik (sic) Park, which promises a wonderful wedding in one of its Jurasik rooms. Just why anybody would wish to get married inside one of those, you do not ask a Punjabi in the chilled 2014.

You also see growing new Punjabi aesthetics on display along with their remitted or inherited riches, what you'd aptly call water-tank art. In Punjab, particularly in its NRI zones, you are nobody if the water tank on top of your house is not shaped like something impressive: a football, a giant hawk, an airplane, sometimes an airplane with a propeller in front and one on top, so I presume it can fly like a chopper too, why take chances. It also gets more creative than that. At Khanauri Mandi in Sangrur constituency, you'd find a replica of our national Parliament. And if that pronounces the Punjabis' commitment to democracy, come to Phagwara to see a tank shaped like, what else, but a tank, a battle tank. This for the Punjabi love of the military.

### **A university called Lovely**

But you also see a familiar logo: Lovely Professional University, very widely advertised and sometimes derided, unfairly as we'd soon discover, as a "teaching shop run by *halwais*", since the founder family, the Mittals, made their fame and brand name running their enormously successful Lovely Sweets.

I would suggest a proper walk around its 600-acre campus, probably one of the finest built in the country. It is India's largest, with approximately 28,000 on-campus students in all disciplines. "Everything else but medicine," as Chancellor Ashok Mittal says. It has probably the largest hostel population for a university in Asia, with about 16,000 boys and girls. It has students from over 26 countries, including from Britain, Thailand, Malaysia, all of Africa and even 16 Chinese. Afghanistan has sent 165 of its brightest, president's scholarship holders.

No surprise that the campus has a street named after Hamid Karzai, who graced its convocation with Pranab Mukherjee last year. There are enormous playgrounds, an underpass and a small flyover, an '*en suite*' shopping mall where outsiders are not allowed, 40-plus ATMs from eight banks, a post office, and offers ACs in its hostels on extra payment. The campus is fully WiFi. This was still a work in progress when I visited BITS, Pilani, to speak there a few months back.

I cannot vouch for its academic quality after a short visit, but the vice-chancellor, Professor Rameshwar Kanwar, is a re-import from Iowa State University, where he was a renowned professor of hydrology. What I can vouch for, instead, are two things: One, that it gives you the feel of a wonderfully modern, well-endowed, world-class campus and two, you can see students from every state of India — 4,000 from Andhra/Telangana — and so many countries worldwide. But how come you do not see as many Punjabis as you would expect?

Mittal says their percentage is just around 30, because that is about the number that passes LPU's tough entrance tests. Of course, he adds, they also weigh in for diversity. But the fact, the cruel fact, is that the education system in Punjab today does not produce too many kids good enough to dominate even its own LPU (as the university now prefers to be known). Other national institutions, the IIT in Ropar, the ISB in Mohali, hardly have any local students. It is a painful truth, but you have to state it. The young Punjabi today is not competitive.

### **A flight to Kanada**

But why confine yourself to boring academia and scholarship? Or sports? Today's young Punjabi, whether half-educated or well qualified, is brilliantly competitive at one thing: Escaping overseas. Disappearing to someplace in the West seems so much the dream of the young Punjabi now that even gods have been dragged into the consular business.

Look left, and about 5 km short of LPU, you can't miss the entrance gate to a village called Talhan. It has a concrete "British Airways" jet sitting atop it. With six engines, just in case.

A fitting sign that the village is famous for its 'Hawai Jahaz Waala' gurdwara. This, in fact, is the ancient Gurdwara Talhan Sahib, but somehow, a legend has grown around it. That if you present a toy airplane model here, your wish for a foreign visa will be granted. Every day, the gurdwara collects scores of these. Shops around it sell these models in every known airline's livery. Of the two found in the gurdwara last week, one had Malaysian Airlines colours.

Hoardings at the entrance and along the route sell dreams of visas and migration to America, the UK, Australia, Canada (often spelt Kanada), New Zealand. While many offer to help you pass the IELTS, as the examination for basic English language knowledge is called, my favourite is

the one that promises to take you overseas without passing the IELTS: “Doesn’t matter even if you were educated in Punjabi medium.”

I don’t know if any of these agents has a deal with god, but you’d wonder why the UK, US, Canadian, Australian and other embassies haven’t set up their extension visa counters here. Young Punjabis today do not want to study, do not want to compete or ride the wave of reform and growth in India. They want to escape and run low-level services overseas or fill up European jails as illegals. This brawn drain of sorts is modern Punjab’s answer to brain drain. The most flourishing business in Punjab, besides narcotics, is illegal immigration or what is called, for some reason, *kabootarbaazi*, as if all young Punjabis now are pigeons wanting to fly the coop. This is a dig for a people who adore the hawk and follow Guru Gobind Singh’s credo of being like a hawk fighting the sparrows — one better than *sawa-lakh* (1,25,000) of those.

Along with drugs, liquor, corruption and high-handedness, this phenomenon is also playing in this election campaign and fuelling an anti-incumbency that, combined with Sonia Gandhi’s inspired action in forcing her topmost leaders into the fight, has made Punjab one of the most closely contested states in India. And nobody is making better use of this new space than the AAP which, in turn, has chosen some candidates brilliantly, either from popular culture or widely respected doctors and activists. How many seats they will win, you ask the psephologists: Yogendra Yadav, Dorab Sopariwala, Prannoy Roy. But I can tell you they will poll a lot more votes than most opinion polls give them so far.

### **Comedian turns the knife**

The most entertaining and politically astute candidate in this campaign is comedian Bhagwant Mann in Sangrur, and many now say he is the frontrunner in what once used to be a Communist fortress. He is not a mere clown. Just like Lalu Prasad, he has the ability to load the funniest of his lines with pure politics. “The mightiest fall,” he says. “Lalu used to say, *jab tak samose mein aaloo, tab tak Bihar mein Lalu... samose mein toh abhi bhi aaloo hai, lekin Bihar mein Lalu kahan?*”

In this election, he says, you have a choice of one of three pens to write your fortune with: one, of the Akalis and BJP, is filled with the ink of smack and liquor; the second, of the Congress, with corruption and the blood of 1984 victims; and the third, made in Arvind Kejriwal’s factory, with pure, clean honesty, so check it out.

He devastates the Akalis and their populism: “Don’t say the Akalis have done nothing. They have laid so many foundation stones. Again, don’t say these are useless. Ask ‘*awara jhottas* (wandering male buffaloes)’. If the foundation stones were not there, what would they scratch their butts with? So, your government has even launched a *yojana* for ‘*jhottas*’, and soon these buffaloes will come with Badal’s photo painted on their backsides, like everything else that they give you free.”

This is the boldest and most inspirational attack on freebie culture I have heard in a long time. “Now, I believe they are promising you free utensils. Be careful, ladies, now your ‘*patilas* (pans)’ will come painted with Badal *saab*’s picture. So, you will have to cook in the

kitchen in your *ghunghat*. And the ‘*dolu* (bucket)’ will have Kaka Sukhbir, the ‘*gadvi* (lota)’ Nanhi Chhan (mocking Harsimrat Badal for her NGO for the girl child by that name), and on the *chamchas* (spoons)?” The crowd has taken the cue by now. The cry goes up: “(Bikram Singh) Majithia.” He is Sukhbir’s brother-in-law and, in Amritsar, Arun Jaitley’s fate rests in his hands.

Mann even attacks the current craze for emigration. And then, the final turn of the knife at village Kakra, incidentally the birthplace of Diwan Todar Mal, one of Akbar’s navratnas who gave India its land-revenue system: “Today, my friends, we Punjabis can’t even look our martyrs’ statues in the eye. We are so ashamed.”

As I hop off his truck and turn into the *mandi* town of Bhawanigarh, two different signboards catch my eye: a “Fun and Chill” beauty parlour, and a “Chill” shop where Katrina Kaif sells you her favourite beverages. And the penny drops. Today’s Punjab is best and most cruelly characterised in poet-actor-musician Piyush Mishra’s outrageously brilliant spoof on famous martyr and Bhagat Singh’s inspiration, Ram Prasad Bismil’s ‘*Sarfaroshi ki Tamanna*’, from Anurag Kashyap’s *Gulaal*: “*O re Bismil kaash aate, aaj tum Hindostaan, dekhte key mulk saara kya tashan kya chill mein hai... aaj ka launda yeh kehta, hum toh Bismil thak gaye...*” and so on.

Mann is only substituting Bismil with Bhagat Singh, and Hindostaan with today’s Punjab, declining in its own chill.