

NO ALTERNATIVE TO POLITICAL STRUGGLE

Pramod Kumar

The author is Associate Research Coordinator, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development (CRRID), Chandigarh

The Punjab problem is well on the way to setting several records... records the country can do very nicely without.

The first high mark is violence. It now seems that even India's struggle for Independence was not so blood-splattered. Even by the official count, the death toll must be in five figures. The unofficial estimate is that at least 30, 000 people have perished – felled by bullets or blasts or killed in the Delhi, Kanpur and Bokaro riots.

The second “record” is that at least four Prime Ministers have tried to grapple with the Punjab problem, each in her or his own way; one succeeded in defusing the situation for a few months before he grew impatient and applied the reverse gear. As for the other three, Punjab has been the recipient of pious wishes and impious edicts.

Yet another distinction is the galaxy of super cops and super forces arriving in the State with robust optimism and retreating with barely their smile intact. Along with countless corpses lies buried the reputation of select law-enforcers.

Above all, Punjab has seen the sunset of the country's oft-proclaimed faith in the democratic process. For several years now, the State and its people have been living in the hazy world of masked authoritarianism. It is as though 1947 and all that it signifies did not happen in Punjab at all.

HOW did Punjab get into such a mess?

It all started with the idea of using every situation to promote narrow individual and political interests rather than resolve the problem or even adopt a long-term approach towards its resolution. Ad hoc and deliberately delayed initiatives have complicated the situation without in any way altering or moderating the underlying forces. The favourite tactic for ruling parties faced with a powerful opposition has been to undercut or outflank the opponents in the eyes of the masses. This has contributed to the subversion of democratic institutions and norms.

Therefore, the issues relating to the revival of democratic institutions or norms, on the one hand, or strengthening the forces of masked authoritarianism, on the other, have assumed significance. The process of election, the Press, the political party system and even so basic a right as freedom have a built-in dual role. Each of these can be misused, or effectively used to achieve desirable ends.

The system and its supporters should enter into a political and ideological struggle with its detractors; this is a regular process in any liberal democracy. An election can be used to sharpen a retrogressive social division, to introduce violence (misuse of the process) or to mobilize liberal opinion as a bulwark against extremist forces (effective use).

Newspapers can whip up unhealthy passions (misuse) or articulate the urges and aspirations of the people and inspire them to fight for justice in a democratic way (effective use).

The system of political parties can be use to weaken the liberal democratic system (by opposing elections, supporting curbs on the Press and endorsing abridgement of basic human rights and exacerbating fears of suppression expressed by the militants), or to fan out into villages and counter the appeal of militancy and pose the choice before people in a direct, forthright manner.

In this context, it will not be wrong to conclude that the proponents of the present system are guilty of the same perverse wisdom which the proponents of terrorism suffer from. It is this which provides the basis for the politics becoming deadlier in the post-1980 phase.

It is the tunnel vision and the individual centred approach which have not only added to the existing crisis, but complicated it. It all started with one powerful Prime Minister trying to demonise an individual in muffled tones in the print medium and in an overblown rhetoric in the spoken word.

The Punjab issue came to be equated with him. With the advantage of hindsight, it can be said that Bluestar did not come out of the blue; it was at least two years in the making. Again, the events of June 1984 were an inevitable fallout. It was the first instance of tunnel vision in operation.

The delay in putting down the November 1984 riots and the use of a distorted version of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution as the main election plank were also the result of this vision. During the 1984 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress-I propagated the view that the Akali Dal was posing a danger to the country's integrity and, therefore, the whole country should get united under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi to save the country.

Immediately after the elections, an accord was signed with the same Akali Dal and the danger posed to the country's integrity by the Anandpur Sahib Resolution and the Akali Dal vanished overnight. The belief behind signing the accords was that the Delhi riots backlash would automatically purge Punjab of any thought of violence and the Punjab Accord and the thumping electoral victory of the opponents of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution would render Punjab demand-free – that is, there would be no demand for any concession from the Centre, History has proved what a painful comedy it was.

The support to, and later the dismissal of, the Barnala Ministry and imposition of President's Rule are other prominent landmarks. In the initial phase, the Barnala Ministry was supported on the understanding that it was possible to control

extremism with the help of the Akali Dal-L power. When this did not succeed, the Barnala Ministry was dismissed. It was asserted that S.S. Barnala was kowtowing to the militants and his removal would promptly terrorise the hardliners into submission; as an alternative there was always police and hundreds of companies of para-military forces. President's Rule was thought to be the most conducive period, if not the sure instrument, to put down militancy. That these have failed is no surprise, since a fragmented diagnosis can never succeed.

Since then, election to the State Assembly is being postponed on the pretext that the voting would be influenced by the gun and victorious militants would dictate terms. This is patently an after-thought to rationalize the success of the Mannled Akali Dal in the 1989 elections and to ward off future electoral losses of the same shattering magnitude. (Incidentally, parties opposing the election secured more than 61 per cent of the vote.

From when has the practice started of pre-determining the winners in an election and then ordering it? Also is an election the opportunity to seek a popular mandate or to keep out those unwanted by a few power-brokers or even by some committed individuals belonging to various shades of political opinion? Fragmented diagnosis could not be perhaps debased any further.

In the same manner, the restrictions on newspapers have been imposed without realizing that the Press too performs a dual role. It is possible that a few newspapers may publish inflammatory material. The remedy for such a situation is not to clamp down on or mark out newspapers for harsh treatment. A newspaper is essentially a clearing house of information and facts. It is the grand forum for a daily debate between the supporters and opponents of any issue, any event or any policy. It follows that the greater the freedom of a newspaper to print all that is printable, the greater the chance of the most healthy idea being accepted by the people.

The point is that newspapers offer a chance to secular and democratic forces to reach the people and in the same way, there may be other newspapers which may be articulating the ideas which are anti-people in nature. People (or institutions such as government) who think that they are right should welcome a debate in newspapers so that the morally right acquires legitimacy. People may go wrong and be swayed by a wrong or unhealthy appeal, but people's support is what legitimacy is all about in democracy.

This list of chilling landmarks is not complete, but whatever has been mentioned has one thing in common. They are all coloured by fragmented diagnosis. Each event or development or issue is considered in isolation. It should not be; each is part of a process. There is a cause-and-effect linkage among these issues. The process in Punjab has been one of gradual de-democratisation, or the whittling down of the basic rights of the people, or the abdication of the basic obligation of the system or the downgrading of the most precious facet of democracy: legitimacy.

The Punjab problem has reached the present stage through, mainly, three routes. It started with the "teach them a lesson" approach (inventor: Bhajan Lal of Haryana), wove its way through "backlash" (November 1984 riots), stayed for sometime on the "bullet-for-bullet" road (Julio Ribeiro's brain-child) and, finally, has settled down on

the long highway of “throttling” democratic institutions (which is a cruder version of the bullet-for-bullet theory).

Such a purblind policy is bound to leave its sickening mark all along the way. And in Punjab there are several of them. One, liberal democratic norms have been the first casualty of the stress on the system. A sant speaks in angry language. Liberal democratic norms warrant that the system – his stated rival – should examine his arguments, remove his genuine grievances and rebut the other points. Instead, he is painted in the darkest of colours. A masked authoritarian approach gets precedence over the liberal democratic approach.

A little later, Barnala, Badal and Tohra are arrested and hundreds of others are sent to distant Jodhpur to languish in detention for some years. Talks are held with propped up leaders to hoodwink people. Liberals who have full faith in the system are isolated and those nursing serious grievances against the system are patronized. This approach was adopted to counter the people who were a potential threat to the legislative power of the ruling party at the Centre. Political rivals (even when they subscribe to the same political beliefs) are attacked and political forces representing extreme views are patronized. In this case again the tunnel vision prevailed.

The same is the case with terrorists and terrorism. Terrorists are those who are attracted to a creed and the creed is terrorism. As long as the creed, or the basic causes that have spawned it, flourishes, it will attract a large following. From this follows that the attack should be on the creed and not on the followers alone. A reversal of priority – that is, attacking terrorists and not terrorism – will increase the following (terrorists) and enhance the appeal of the creed (terrorism). This is elementary, but fragmented diagnosis repulses precisely such an elementary approach.

The dualism between the terrorist and terrorism is present in all other democratic institutions and organs of the state apparatus. The aim must be to enter into this historical struggle between the use and misuse of liberal democratic institutions. It is very difficult to predict who will win this struggle – forces of perversion or forces of progression. This question becomes relevant only if there is a struggle.

Unfortunately, this kind of struggle is going by default. Some political parties are shying away from the political ideological struggle gripped by the fear that they may lose it, and others do not ideologically subscribe to this kind of struggle. In this context it is necessary not to be taken in by “anti” formulas, because they are inadequate and are purely negative. As is well known, “it is not possible to counter principle except by producing a superior alternative principle.”

Therefore, the answer to democracy, howsoever degenerate, corrupt and ineffective it may be, should not be seen in masked authoritarianism. Rather, an alternative must be seen in a genuine progressive democracy.

Liberal democratic norms constitute the best recipe of cure manifold popular protests and partly articulated grievances. Give the will of the people free play and you know the state of political health of the people and the best liberal democratic remedy available to you. Conversely, a departure from this path and recourse to masked

authoritarian measures is the surest way to fan popular misgivings and popular opposition into popular militancy.

Militancy is not merely a state of mind; it is a political ideology. It is not the possession of a gun. If the system, the target of the gun, wants to forever silence the gun, it should confront the politics and ideology of the militants with its own. Such politics and ideology needs to be better based on consensus of a chosen few.