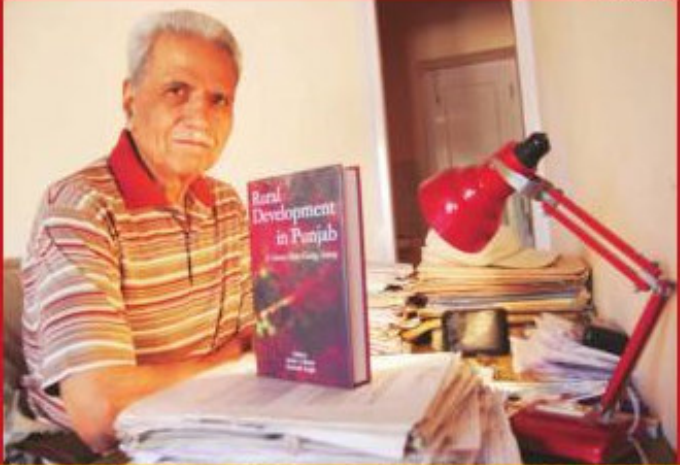


Sunday Personality

PUNJAB NEEDS THE WILL TO BOUNCE BACK



HE'S BEEN A WITNESS TO THE STRUGGLES OF THE REGION AND ITS PEOPLE HERE AND ABROAD. ANURADHA SHUKLA TALKS TO ECONOMIST AUTAR SINGH DHESE.

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Define the Punjabi community today..

Punjabis are a 'virtual' community now; no longer a community of place ... a community of culture with no geographical boundaries. Punjabis, wherever they reside in the world, are connected by values inherent in Punjabi culture. The community keeps on advancing, but it does not forget its roots. The centre of this community may soon shift from Punjab to a country like Canada.

What do you think should be focus of policy for the community?

The focus of policy should now be to facilitate and create an environment to help the NRIs work for their villages and also give them economic incentives for investing here, as they naturally want returns too.

How far do you think post Green Revolution policies have taken Punjab?

Punjab is now an economy of migrants. There is nothing to hold people back from going abroad. Economy has weakened. Lack of vision is ruining the state.

Why is this so?

Punjab's overdependence on agriculture has ruined the only natural resource Punjab has, namely land. Intensive land use has ruined the environment, water level, soil health, leading to stagnating productivity, rising costs and reduced landholdings. Under these circumstances it is impossible to meet aspirations of the rural people.

What reforms do we need?

We need to transform our state and our society into a modern industrial one with reduced dependence on agriculture. This requires institutional changes, investment in modern infrastructure, research and development and education for all are key areas.

There are few options for youth here. Why?

There is plenty of work to do in Punjab but the jobs available suit neither their skills, nor their aptitudes nor their aspirations. They have a very limited role to play on the small scale farms, the industrial sector is dominated by very tiny units where labour is highly underpaid, the service sector is largely informal.

and youth have neither land to till nor modern skills to get absorbed in organised sectors.

Doesn't education give a way forward?

The educational system is highly dysfunctional. In earlier days, our system copied the British system; now it copies the semester system of US. We must stop copying; it is not going to help. How can you have integrated society if you have various types of schools and go on trying to duplicate foreign educational institutions instead of facing real issues. The affiliating system, adopted on British pattern, is not working here as one university cannot effectively administer hundreds of campuses mushrooming under it. In the West the colleges are autonomous.

What about brain drain?

A society that loses its young talent and makes them international migrants can never grow. There is no guidance for the youth. Counselors only tell them what course to choose based on their marks which come from a system of mugging. Youth have no way to know their aptitude in any field.

You went to England to study when you were a young man. What would be your advice to today's youth?

Youth must stand up for themselves and create space for their development by identifying their constraints and eliminating them. Developing one's capabilities is the answer to the problem.

When youth do not get useful guidance what are the consequences?

There has been a serious breakdown of the moral fibre of Punjab. Corruption, lawlessness, crime are on the rise because moral institutions have failed. If the head of the family sets a poor example, the family will go astray, similarly people emulate the example set by the leaders. If we see crime and corruption all around us, the finger of blame must point upwards. Such things become common when people lose respect for their leaders and government generally.

Tell us about your work with Village Life Improvement Foundation?

We took up few villages mainly concentrated in Doaba and a few in Majha and Ludhiana to develop a self-sustaining system to give these villages all modern facilities. These villages have their own system of sanitation and garbage removal and their own sewerage treatment plants. Schools in these villages have been upgraded and the villages have even created their own parks. All works are maintained by local trusts. These villages are models of how to achieve modern facilities at 20 to 40 per cent less cost. Here the most backward citizens have been made to hold the reins of development. For example most of the villages we work with have Dalit sarpanchs.

What made you come back?

I hold a Diploma in Development Administration from University of Leeds, UK, and two degrees of M Sc - one in International Economics from University of Surrey, and the other in Quantitative Economics. My PhD, also in Economics is from the University of Birmingham besides a two-year stint as lecturer in Economic Planning and Forecasting with Coventry University I have even put in a stint as a freelance journalist with Race Today, a publication of the Institute of Race Relations, London. But my heart was always here and I thought I had a role to play here. I came here and got absorbed in my work here after I joined Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, in 1975. I also became a consultant with the World Bank but came back after three months and also refused an offer from University of Harvard. Today I am a contented man but I still feel a lot more still needs to be done in shaping economic policy for the region

About your work with Indian community in UK?

When I went to UK in 1958 my idea was to study medicine. I became part of Indian Workers' Association in South Hall and there I came across needless infighting among its leaders. Such situations are still common. I tried to reduce the conflicts by telling them that if Indians can't manage to cooperate for their own good, then India did not deserve freedom. I became the assistant general secretary and I was usually the one who negotiated with the authorities on issues such as allowing families of Indian workers to go to England. The British authorities were grateful to us for resolving issues in peaceful manner. My work in race relations was what gave me the opportunity to meet Martin Luther King when he stopped in England on his way to Oslo to collect his Noble Prize. He appreciated our role of uniting the migrant community. I was also founder executive member of Campaign Against Racial Discrimination and lobbied for legislation in the British Parliament.

What's your take on the attacks on Indian youth in Australia?

I have always said that the kind of racial discrimination in the West is more dangerous than in India because around 20 highly qualified youth from Andhra Pradesh have been killed in the West over the past few months. The fact is that middle class Indian youth get student visas to go to Australia but their intention is to find work there and become citizens. When jobs are involved communal tension is bound to happen.

What underlies problems faced by Punjab?

Punjab's tragedy is failure of leadership, semi-literate politicians interfering in the affairs of the universities, no academicians with vision are coming forward to head universities. Our political leadership does not enjoy faith of the people, as personal rather than social goals are paramount to them. We need dynamic leadership. Checks and balances need to be introduced in important institutions

The answer for Punjab is?

Only mind power and not muscle power can take us anywhere. Punjab needs to shift directly from agrarian economy to a knowledge-based economy. We can skip the heavy industrialisation stage as we do not have the scope. We need industries like pharmaceuticals, scientific instrumentation, nanotechnology, biotechnology etc

For this we need to strengthen education system, provide good health facilities, introduce state funding in schools, heavy investment in research and development etc

Students need a base in Maths, English and basic sciences

What are you working on now?

My next book is a compilation of my articles published in major newspapers over the years and after that I am writing Traditional Communities and Moral behavior.