

Pash, Peasantry and the Green Revolution

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Pash appeared on the poetic scene in Punjab with the publication of his first collection of poems entitled *Loh Katha* in 1970. This was a period of political, economical and ideological turmoil in Punjab. The Naxalite¹ Movement had caught the fancy of the young people as some of them saw in it as an answer to class exploitation. Pash was deeply influenced by the political and ideological climate of the day (time). His poetry can be seen as an attempt to voice his protest against rampant injustice and inequality as he perceived these in the society in his day. In fact, he sees his poetry as a weapon in his war against injustice, exploitation and dehumanization. The rise of the Naxalite Movement in Punjab was intertwined with the Green Revolution. The Green Revolution brought enormous changes in the society, economy, culture and politics of Punjab. It can be argued that an appraisal of Pash's poetry must take into account the backdrop of the Green Revolution.

In 1963, Norman Borlaug² ushered in the Green Revolution through a combination of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and cheap energy along with high yielding variety (HYV) of seeds, popularly known as "miracle seeds". The objective of the Green Revolution was to increase food production in India in order to make the country self-sufficient in food grains. Since the greatest achievements of the Green Revolution were noticed in the state of Punjab, it has generally been considered and projected as the best example of a positive transformation unleashed by the Green Revolution in India. Ironically, the fruits of the Green Revolution were not all sweet. The changes it unleashed in Punjab were of a complex nature and included, according to observers like Vandana Shiva, widespread violence at various levels. Even the communal politics of the 1980s can be seen as related in important ways to the consequences of the Green Revolution.

The Green Revolution did not bring prosperity to all people engaged in agriculture. It has been remarked that it further impoverished the poor farmers, pushing them into the trap of debt. On account of its reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the Green Revolution extracted an extremely heavy ecological balance. In fact, the techno-political dimension of the Green Revolution was intended to bring material abundance to farmers but this was

never achieved on a wide scale. The Green Revolution brought in its train, misery and poverty for the debt-ridden farmers, in addition to contaminated and toxic soil resulting from the excessive use of fertilizers/ pesticides.

Studies indicate that the basic aim of this revolution was to cause general economic abundance through increased crop production. This phenomenon was visible in the initial stages of the revolution. Yet scarcity too emerged as a by-product of this process. Interestingly, the consumption level of fertilizers per hectare and the purchase of tractors through easy loans were considerably higher among the farmers with small holdings. The class of small farmers had little capacity to return the loans. The pressure on the farmers by money lenders and the private agencies forced them to sell their small holdings. The social relations were also poisoned by the materialistic tendencies which flourished along with the Green Revolution. Conflict and violence were therefore not far away. While the Green Revolution was basically considered to be meant for the farmer and his welfare, the interests of the Western countries were well served in the prosperity of their multinational corporations than that of the farmers. Jashandeep Singh Sandhu observes:

As the success of the new seeds depended on chemicals and fertilizers produced mainly in the developed West, an argument pointing to the creation of relationship in which the third world governments would become inextricably linked to the multinational chemical producers was put forth. (216)

To check the likely growth of inequality, the government agencies established the cooperatives, which however could not serve their purpose. The cooperatives were also controlled by the elite who backed the system which favoured large scale production through the use of fertilizers. The elite were also to get major chunk of subsidies and the support of banking sector. As a matter of fact, there was an unprecedented increase in population in Punjab which ran concurrent to the Green Revolution. Whether it was an offshoot of the initial success of the Green revolution or not is debatable, but the increase surely led to greater number of small farm holdings. Sandhu refers to Norman K Nicholson's observation that "[t]he 21% population increase in Punjab between 1961 and 1971 is cited as the most plausible explanation of the increase in the number of small farm holdings" (217).

Thus, a consequence of the Green Revolution was the increasing inequality between the large and the small owners of agricultural land. The limited

availability of land combined with high input costs to increase the productivity of land resulted in the prices of agricultural land skyrocketing. Explaining this, Surjit S. Sidhu writes:

Due to the relatively inelastic supply of land, increased productivity of land resulting from the introduction of new wheat was reflected in as subsequent years in rising land values. This became a windfall gain to the owners of farmland – a gain at almost no cost to the owners.... [T]he ‘effects’ of the ‘Green Revolution’ seem to have increased existing inequalities of income distribution in favour of larger land owners. (221)

The small farmer (owning less than 2.61 acres of land) did not afford to avail the facility of credit also, which further made him uncompetitive (Sen A35). Apparently, though the Green Revolution was intended to avert the threat of violent class-based unrest, as Vandana Shiva also observes:

The Green Revolution was conceived within this orthodox view of scarcity and violence. The Green Revolution was prescribed as a techno-politic strategy that would create abundance in agricultural societies and reduce the threat of Communist insurgency and agrarian conflict. (14)

Against the intended benefits, however it brought misery to a large number of families involved in farming. The process of the Green Revolution also caused imposition of the policies and power of the centre on the states. The contradiction between the centre and the states ruled by opposing political parties was thus further aggravated by the Green Revolution. With the planning and allocation of resources by the Centre (considered to be ruled by a party which wasn't the Akali party, which, in turn, was a party catering to the interests of the Jat Sikh farmers) the polarization of differences between the farming Sikh community and the trading Hindu community was allowed to grow as a bogey in the game of political one-upmanship. The allegations of discrimination received added credence when the centre mishandled the issues of violence in Punjab, Delhi and elsewhere, particularly the events leading up to Operation Blue Star, the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the anti-Sikh programme. These events can be seen as a result, direct or indirect, of disruption of a society by the complex sociological, cultural, economical and political forces unleashed by the Green Revolution.

Vandana Shiva's study reveals several important facts about the Green

Revolution in the Indian Punjab. She asserts that it did not bring either prosperity or peace to the state. It rather riddled the state with discontent and violence through "...diseased soils, pests-infected crops, water logged deserts and indebted and discontented farmers. Instead of peace, Punjab has inherited conflict and violence" (Shiva 19). The cost of the Green Revolution thus included the loss of at least fifteen thousand lives in six years. Unlike other studies of the usual kind on the Green Revolution, where abundance has been projected as its outcome, Shiva has traced "aspects of the conflicts and violence in cotemporary Punjab to the ecological and political demands of the Green Revolution as a scientific experiment in development and agricultural transformation" (20). It has also been observed that the imposition of the American model of agriculture through the use of pesticides and fertilizers in Punjab probably resulted in a similar situation also in America where the fertile prairies turned into deserts.

The demands of the Green Revolution on the farmers included increased expenditure on a variety of pesticides, fertilizers and energy for which they could rely only on heavy loans which pushed them into debt. There was also a vast and subtle shift in the social relationship caused through changed agrarian structures through the Green Revolution. The neighbouring countries of India had already passed through similar movements of peasant unrest whenever the political or economic considerations motivated an effort to change the existing though primitive agricultural practices. Above all, the results of the Green Revolution, immediate or far reaching, could bestow abundance only on a few but they brought scarcity to the majority. The resulting inequality thus became the root cause of violence that appeared in Punjab under different forms from the 1970s onwards.

The poetry of Pash needs to be understood in the context of the specific conditions prevailing in Punjab from the 1960s to 1980s, to which the Green Revolution had contributed significantly and in several contradictory ways. The sharpening of the class conflict, with marginalisation of the poor from the mainstream society, was noticeable. The gap between the rich and poor farmers also increased as a consequence of the revolution. Such social and economic conflicts sharpened by the Green Revolution are articulated in Pash's poetry.

Pash, who has often been addressed as "a son of soil" and who is visualised as lying "spread over the fields" in the poems dedicated to him by his comrades, was both a witness to the fate of the poor farmers of those times and himself lived that fate (Dhanjal and Sandhu 71, 30). The interest of Pash for observing

and celebrating the chores of a farmer and paint the panoramic village life indicate that he was attached to the life and concerns of a farmer including the miseries of his likes. His romantic allegiance to the countryside is almost inspiring, “So beautiful was the night today! All through I had intimate talk with it, with dew-covered wheat lying asleep on the earth’s vast bridal bed, with heaps of sugar-cane stalks aglow in the moonlight....” (Gill 4). Identifying himself as a peasant, Pash could write about the poverty and misery of the peasantry. In fact, it was an issue of cardinal significance for him as a poet.

As we have noted above, the economic, political, social and cultural upheavals set into motion by the Green Revolution caused a breakdown of the traditional structures. Tejwant Singh Gill highlights the situation of the farmer of those times caught in the effects of the Green Revolution in his study *Pash: Jeevan Te Rachna* (Pash: Life and Works). Gill asserts that effects of the Green Revolution were visible by the mid 1960s when the use of fertilizers and pesticides had doubled the agricultural production. However, the cost of agricultural production had also grown four times due to the expenditure on inputs. The small farmer could not celebrate the emergence of the Green Revolution for long. The large land holders reaped the benefits of the Green Revolution both ways: rich agricultural production on the one hand and on the other grabbing the land holdings of the small farmers, who had been reeling under heavy debts, raised to meet the cost of production and hence were forced to part with their small holdings. These developments left no options for the young like Pash who were forced to look for jobs as landless farmers or to migrate to other countries as labour. Gill finds Pash as both sufferer and sympathizer in this situation and giving expression to the disaster unfolding around him. The expression of angry protest against rich landlords who dispossessed the small farmers of their holdings can be found in many places in his diary:

Capitalists and landlords who are a few in number have led my loved country to nothing. So will it remain till these butchers are not deprived of this outrageous right. What after all is meant by democracy and freedom? The biggest joke that the Law of the Republic plays with the starving labourer and ragged farmer is of granting the right to own property to their heart’s content. Every clause bestows the right upon them to increase their wealth at will and keep it intact as well. This freedom gives the rich the right to exploit, at the same time extending to the poor the right to be thoroughly exploited. (Translation by Gill 18)

Like Gill, Kesar Singh Kesar also observes that the poetry of Pash comes out of a close study of the economic, political and cultural experiences of the Punjabi peasant (Singh 20). In fact, Pash's portrayal of the poor Punjabi peasant is not that of a meek sufferer. The source of his strength is his religious faith. Kesar cites poems like "Bedawa", "Sharadanjali" and "Joga Singh Di Swai Parchol", etc. as examples....incomplete sentence. Gur Iqbal Singh notes that the Green Revolution was an effort of the Indian Government to find a solution to the problem of food and scarcity through a plan framed by the Western policy makers. This led to the enrichment of landlords and the humiliation of the small farmers. Hence the farmer, defeated on all fronts and with all illusions shattered, was longing for a revolutionary upheaval.

Surjit contends that Pash emerges as a front runner to express the experiences of the rural people by touching upon their lives marked by misery, poverty and misfortune (Singh 114). The poetry of Pash records the impoverished farmer's conditions, his resentment against the system and projection of class struggle. Pash has a clear idea of his obligation as a poet in a given situation. In "Word, Art and Poetry", he sees poetry as "... words which neither fear nor die" in the face of any operation (Ghai 100). According to him, poetry brings about in "the brightness of night" what is prohibited in "darkness of the day" (100). Pash, as a poet, perceived the need to deal with the consequences of the Green Revolution as a serious act of commitment.

In his first collection of poems "Loh Katha" (Iron's Tale), his first poem titled "Bharat" ("India") sketches out an image of the Punjabi farmer:

This name owes its essence
To those who toil in the fields,
And still measure time,
By the length of shadows,
They have no other concerns
Except their bellies,
And when they are hungry,
They can chew their own limbs. (Ghai 43)

The life of the farmer has been reduced to searching for food. The images here representing hungry farmers, would probably appear indecent according to the bourgeois norms of literary discourse. In this, the struggle of the poet at the level of poetic conventions comes to the fore. The giver of food to others becomes a helpless seeker. The starving peasant feels like chewing

his own limbs. For him life is nothing more than “an empty ritual” and death might give him relief from this burden. The real India is not found in “Dushyant”; it is, rather, synonymous with the tiller who tills the land and grows food. The conflict between the peasant and his exploiter is also used by Pash directly to exemplify class struggle. The hard-earned labour is snatched away by the exploiter, “Where peasants grow food/ And robbers break in....” (43). In another poem, “To the Rotten Flowers”, Pash puts the exploiter and the exploited together in a sharp comparison. For him the exploiter is a barbarous rich city dweller and the exploited are the people of the countryside:

When we were being robbed of our bread
And disrobed of our dignity
We the illiterate country bumpkins were dumb-
Why had your literate blathering tongues
Gone mute in the coffee houses? (55).

The bourgeois society turns silent at the sight of the poor suffering and prefers to let them face it singularly. There is reversal in the treatment of the exploiter and the exploited; the exploiter is considered in the term of disrespect labeling them ‘literate blathering tongues’ whereas the exploited are called in terms of respect as ‘the illiterate country bumpkins’. The complicit poet is dubbed as ‘gone mute in the coffee houses?’ The protest does not end here. The poor farmer believes in living a dignified life even in the face of starvation:

We don’t grumble even when we starve
You who carry multicolored flags
Are overfed and yet cry for more –
Why this howling and breast beating? (55)

The poor Punjabi farmer who could eat dry bread with a slice of onion shall surely rise one day to ‘Have come to devour your roads and rooms’ (is it a quote). The class conflict also adds to the level of patience and fortitude of the starving farmers.

In yet another poem “Hath” (“Hands”), Pash invests the body with new signification by including violence for the cause of justice. The poet enumerates the actions, sometime duties and also the power bestowed on hands, starting with the mention of his beloved’s hands; he concludes the poem in a revolutionary strain:

Hands are given not merely to toil.
They are also given to break a tyrant’s hands.

Those who fail to do the duty given to hands
Those who insult their grace
Are cripples
Hands are given to lend support
Hands are given to say 'yes'. (93)

The affirmative 'yes' stands for life and dignity. The poem also speaks of the duties of the village people, including the teacher, the tailor, the barber, the midwife, the wage earner etc. When it comes to the tiller of the land, his duty is not restricted to toil only; his hands are also meant to smash the hands of exploiter. If the hands of a farmer can lend support, they can also extract a 'yes' from adversity.

Pash underlines the rights of the common farmer in "We Shall Fight Comrade", saying :

We shall fight
... ..
Until those who till the land
[Can] inhale the fragrance of mustard blossoms. (95)

The larger political vision of the struggle until victory is achieved inspires Pash to evoke the sensuous experience in the life of a farmer. However, the fight would continue:

If we don't have the gun,
We shall have the sword
... ..
We shall fight. (95)

The poet's keen observations of the life of debt-ridden peasantry are memorable. The irresistible temptations of the capitalist to trap the naïve and innocent farmer in the vicious circle of debt have been portrayed thus:

The debt incurred for the sister's marriage
Cannot be cleared in our lifetime
All the drops of blood used up in the fields
Will not add up to paint
Even one peaceful smiling face. (77)

The lust for ill gotten money does not end here. The exploiter eyes poor farmer's the land too (reframe) :

Leering at our green fields
On our greenery around the wells

Those who have seen
The golden corn shrivelling upon rooftops
But not their prices shrivelling in the market. (78)

The greed of the exploiter and the exploitation of the farmer in the market constitute a vicious, endless process. In the poem titled “To Her”, Pash points out the whims of the exploiter who indulges in exploitation of all kinds. The painful losses are recorded thus:

All my pain passes through the eye of only one needle
Our peace of mind is gone, so is the exuberance of our fields.
They who have usurped the wealth of our fields
Have also become the enemies of your beauty. (110)

The response of Pash to this exploitation is decisive and uncompromising. The vow to fight it out is visible in the later part of the poem, when he assures his beloved of freedom and the restoration of justice:

All my dreams are bound with the liberation of these crops
The story of your smiles is the story of each peasant
My fate is the fate of changing times
My story is now the story of a blazing sword. (111)

The dream of the poet is to see the peasant liberated. The fate of his beloved and peasant is pitiable. The bold and unflagging determination of the poet is to resort to the use of power to bring an end to the systematic exploitation and repression by the exploiter.

In a mode of wider socio-economic critique, Pash protests against the brutalization of human beings and their enslavement to basic needs:

Centuries have gone past and even today
Bread, toil and crematoriums might still think
We live only for them. (167)

The story of the exploiter and the exploited has been the same for ages now. The plight of peasant has not changed for centuries. The poet observes that a peasant follows a rut to work ceaselessly to earn a living and waits for death as a relief.

The above discussion demonstrates that the poetry of Pash projects the peasant as protagonist whose concern is strong at the heart of the poet. The miseries and sufferings of peasantry become rather prominent against the

backdrop of the Green Revolution. The Green Revolution brought a qualitative change in Punjab's economy through growth in agricultural production to large land-holders only. The poet is pained to see that the plight of the peasantry which is caused by none other than his own countrymen has not undergone any radical change. Pash's poetry speaks of the determination of the sufferer to bring a definite change. It is reflected in the condemnation of the attitude of the exploiter. The voice of protest of peasant is to interrogate the injustice, exploitation and dehumanization of peasantry.

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