

# **The Tribune**

## **Tackling unemployment in Punjab**

THE fundamental strengths of Punjab are its human, land and water resources. The success story of the Green Revolution, the colour of which started fading in the mid-1990s, has, however, led to a serious degradation of soil health and depletion of the water table. The human resources too are facing a serious deterioration in terms of education, health and skill and employability. However, all the three strengths of Punjab are being adversely affected. The rural employment is closely dependent on all these strengths.

Unfortunately such a strategic issue is not getting due and serious recognition, mainly because of the denial mode reflected in the past manifestos of various political parties. Even now all the three political parties in the run-up to the 2017 Assembly elections have neither accorded priority nor drawn a road map to tackle this gigantic problem. They are busy doing negative politics and competitive populism, forgetting that drug abuse among youth is one of the symptoms of widespread unemployment in Punjab.

According to the Statistical Abstract of Punjab (2015), there were 3,61,299 applications pending with all the employment exchanges of Punjab in 2014. Out of them 2,92,238 were educated and 69,061 uneducated. Paradoxically, the same source records that out of the total applicants 3,24,809 were skilled and 36,490 unskilled. Interestingly, the number of beneficiaries of unemployment allowance in the same year was merely 444. The government may be satisfied and happy with the small number of unemployed persons in Punjab as the total number of workers, according to the population Census 2011, is 98.97 lakh.

It needs to be understood that the above mentioned unemployment figures are grossly underestimated and under reported. According to an earlier study (1998) by the Punjab Government, the number of unemployed youth (18-35 years) was 14.72 lakh (8.98 lakh educated and 5.74 lakh uneducated) out of which 10.40 lakh (5.84 lakh educated and 4.56 lakh uneducated) in rural Punjab. Unfortunately, there is no study available after this. This is something unpardonable.

This means we do not have exact data and information about unemployment, what to talk of addressing the issue at the policy level.

But one thing is certain that the number of unemployed persons, especially youth, must be much higher than the 1998 data. The very fact that for a few thousand vacancies of police constable advertised recently there were more than seven lakh applications gives an indication of the extent of unemployment among Punjabi youth. This necessitates a comprehensive study of unemployment in Punjab.

According to the Census 2011, out of the total workforce (98.97 lakh) of Punjab, 61.79 lakh (62.43%) are rural workers. The share of agricultural workers in the total number of workers in Punjab decreased from 62 per cent in 1971 to 36 per cent in 2011, a decline of 26 percentage points. This sharp decline is, however, not due to their absorption entirely in non-farm sectors. As a matter of fact, agriculture has been pushing workforce out of it and non-agriculture sectors have not been developed enough to absorb them. As a matter of fact both the income (net of costs) and employment are shrinking in agriculture. The decelerating growth rate across the sectors has further aggravated the problem.

According to certain estimates (Sucha Singh Gill, 2002), employment in agriculture (crop sector) has declined from 48 crore mandays in 1983-84 to 43 crore mandays in 1996-97. These estimates need to be updated. The employment must have declined further since then but no estimates are available. Presently there is only three months work available in agriculture in Punjab. Besides, there is large-scale under and disguised unemployment in the agriculture sector in particular and in the rural economy in general in Punjab. This has been further substantiated by the existence of nearly 11 lakh marginal workers (who got work between one and 180 days in a year) in the rural sector.

Paradoxically, most of the agricultural produce is sold in raw form by the producers which means deprivation of value addition and additional income and employment. Thus there is an urgent need to go in for processing and manufacturing of the agricultural produce and that too by farmers' cooperatives. In fact, cooperative movement needs to be revamped and strengthened in the state. Such an exercise will give additional income and employment opportunities, especially to marginal and small farmers and agricultural labourers.

Thus development of the rural non-farm sector is sine qua non for addressing the problem of unemployment among youth, particularly the educated. This needs to be an integral part of policy and must be implemented in a missionary mode. In fact, development of the rural non-farm sector will provide an answer to youth unemployment,

particularly in the rural area. The government will have to play as a facilitator, both in terms of finances, technical inputs and marketing the processed and manufactured products of the producers' cooperatives. In addition, there is need to encourage industrial units in the rural areas, mainly based on the rural raw produce, both men and material.

However, development of the rural non-farm sector will require employable and innovative manpower which, in turn, needs strengthening of the rural education system. The government-funded health and education delivery system in general and in the rural area in particular is, however, facing a serious deterioration in terms of financial resources and manpower. The budgetary allocation to education and health has been on the decline for well over four decades. This also needs to be enhanced.