



Punjab Legislative Elections (2022): The New Ray or just a Hoax

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Abstract: "The power is in hands of people", is well proved in legislative Assembly elections held in Punjab, 2022. The historically victory of AAM AADMI PARTY has clearly answered the question that people of Punjab, indeed, need a change (Badlav). This paper intends to highlight how Punjab's political dynamics which is often characterised by a spectrum within which there is a movement from contesting identities resulting in confrontations to these identifies, through mutual accommodations, forging coalitions, has totally overruled its old ideology. Since the convergence of multiple crises – agrarian, ecological, economic – has created a state of flux and a strong impulse towards change, and all the key players are attempting to leverage Punjab's developmental discontents. Along with this, this paper also aims to find out regardless of who loses or win? Will the winner party able to solve the issue which no party has yet come to grip with the wide-ranging issues in Punjab: endemic corruption, sacrilege, drug menace, multiple mafias (sand, transport, liquor, cable), poor infrastructure, rural debt, deindustrialisation and unemployment. In order to write this paper, both primary and secondary sources are studied and analyzed.

Key Words: legislative Assembly, Punjab's developmental discontents, wide-ranging issues, sacrilege, drug menace, multiple mafias, rural debt, deindustrialisation and unemployment.

1. INTRODUCTION :

The point about Indian development which gives it the character of an unprecedented undertaking is that while economic and social change is in important respects planned and directed, it is nonetheless carried on within the framework of an open and undirected polity. This means that the manipulation of change in the image of a few dominant ideas get conditioned by an accelerated pace of political competition, a changing structure of power and influence, and a widening base of political consultation and persuasion.

1.1 Identity politics play a dominant role

Although there is a general conviction that Punjab urgently needs a new deal, identity politics will play a big role. All the four main players are aggressively targeting Dalits, Jat Sikhs, OBCs and non-Dalit Hindus across the three distinct regions of the state.

The two front-runners, AAP and Congress, are in an intense tug-of-war over the 32 per cent Dalit vote. The BJP's outreach efforts, including the promise of a Dalit CM, do not have much resonance. Nor does the BSP-SAD alliance. Mayawati's party has been steadily losing ground in the state. AAP had made serious inroads into the traditional Congress vote-bank in 2017, securing 20 per cent of the Dalit Sikh vote and winning nine reserved seats. Last year, it was the flavour of the season in Dalit bastis with its anti-elite campaign and welfare agenda.

The elevation and projection of Channi appears to have wrested the social justice card from AAP. Despite the latter's best efforts, the Dalit vote is likely to consolidate behind a Dalit CM. The Congress' fear is that this may lead to reverse consolidation, and attenuate its Jat Sikh base. The very public spats between Jat Sikh Pradesh Congress Committee chief Navjot Singh Sidhu and the chief minister have not helped matters, particularly after Sidhu refused to address a rally by Priyanka Gandhi Vadra.



The Jat Sikhs, who account for 21 per cent of the popular vote, are likely to be divided between Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and AAP. The former polls highest among Jat Sikhs, although it lost a slice of vote share to AAP in 2017. While Jat Sikhs tend to distrust the BJP, some may opt for the NDA alliance featuring former CM Amarinder Singh and SAD(S) leader Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa.

Reverse consolidation of non-Dalit Hindu votes could work to the advantage of both AAP and BJP-led alliance. In 2017, the Congress polled highest among Brahmins, Banias and Punjabi Khatri, as voters were spooked by the perception that AAP was close to separatist groups.

This time, AAP has carefully sidestepped the issue, but BJP-Amarinder Singh combine exerts considerable influence among urban non-Dalit Hindus. 'Captain' is playing the nationalist card, which worked to excellent effect in 2019, to target Sidhu. The OBC vote is usually split between Congress and SAD, with the former polling somewhat higher in this segment. However, the perceived marginalisation of OBCs in the Congress is a long-standing grievance. In 2017, AAP took away a solid chunk of OBC votes, at the expense of both Congress and SAD.

The BJP has made a strong push to woo the OBCs, by accommodating Giani Zail Singh's grandson, Inderjeet Singh, and appointing former police officer Iqbal Singh Lalpura as head of the National Minorities Commission. The SAD, too, has promised to increase job quotas. But AAP appears to have the advantage among OBCs.

1.2 Region-wise analysis of 2017 Legislative Election outcome

In the Malwa region, which has 69 of the 117 assembly seats, AAP is in a good space. In 2017, it had won 18 of its 20 seats from here. While many of the wealthiest landowners in Punjab are from this region, it also has a very large number of smallholdings and accounts for the majority of farmers' suicides.

Although AAP's support of the agitation against the farm laws had earned it considerable goodwill among the small farmers, it fell out with the Sanyukt Samaj Morcha (SSM), the farmers' front contesting the elections. The SSM has been steadily losing traction and, as a vote-cutter, will affect AAP and Congress votes alike. Both Channi and AAP's chief ministerial face, Sangrur MP Bhagwant Mann, are from Malwa.

The fertile Doaba region has the highest proportion of Dalits, so Congress hopes to do well there. Although most holdings in this region are small, it is an NRI hub with considerable emphasis on education. Small wonder all four parties are promising financial support to Punjab students who plan to study abroad.

The big question for the Congress is whether it can retain the border region of Majha, the state's 'panthic belt', which gave it a resounding mandate in 2017. The Shiromani Akali Dal is at a natural advantage in this region, and is likely to make significant gains. While the Majha vote tends to go one way, this time it may split between SAD and Congress. AAP has so far failed to penetrate this region, although it has scattered pockets of influence.

2017 assembly elections have signalled the move away from a two-party rotational system to multi-party contests, leading to crowding of the electoral space. Punjab's electoral politics has shown signs of blurring religious and caste fault lines. In this election, the discourse tended to mobilise the voters as population and (de)construct them as homogeneous groups and collectivities. 'It tends to blur the hierarchical power positions based on religio-caste, class and ethnicity. The electoral mobilisations are based on catchall categories to maximise votes' (Kumar 2016:276). This has provided an inlet to a third party, i.e., Aam Admi Party (AAP) into Punjab politics. The AAP raised issues reflecting commonalities of experiences of the citizens belonging to various segments of society, and their interaction with the State on issues such as corruption and drug abuse. Further, citizens were defined as farmers, elders, youth, women, traders, etc. for co-opting them into the electoral discourse. There was a menu card (menu-festo) for the farmers, traders, students, Scheduled Castes, industrialists, women, rather than a manifesto which, by 17 | P a g e definition, was a 'declaration of principles, policies, intentions and, of course, ideological persuasions' (Kumar 2016:6). There was also an emphasis on the welfare of various categories of citizens, and on the citizens' experience of exclusion from interaction with the government rather than the exclusion from the market. In short, electoral politics in Punjab has become fluid.



2. Result of legislative elections 2022 :

After months of questions on whether the voters of Punjab were serious about *badlav* (change), we now have a resounding answer. The Aadmi Party won 92 of the state's 117 assembly constituencies – much more than the 59 it requires to form the government.

The Congress won 18 seats, while the BJP won just two. The state's oldest party, the Shiromani Akali Dal, was also able to win just three seats. No party in Punjab has registered such an emphatic win in the history of its polls. "This was not a victory, it was a tsunami that swept away everyone," said political analyst Jamshid Khan. A major embarrassment appears to be in the making for Punjab's grand old party, SAD, as it could not even reach a double-digit mark. SAD's patriarch and five-time chief minister Parkash Singh Badal lost in his home constituency Lambi (Muktsar Sahib), as has his son and party president Sukhbir Singh Badal from Jalalabad in Fazilka district. The BJP-Amarinder Singh alliance too did not work. Even Captain Amarinder Singh lost from his home constituency, Patiala, to AAP's Ajit Pal Kohli.

Ever since Punjab's reorganisation in 1966, Congress and the Shiromani Akali Dal have ruled Punjab interchangeably. A third front has never won, despite several parties making desperate attempts in different phases of Punjabi politics in the last 50 years. A few of them (for instance the Bharatiya Janata Party, which allied with SAD) ended up stitching alliances to stay relevant.

But it was clear even before today that the political scenario is very different this time. Once known for its bipolar contest, Punjab for the first time witnessed five-cornered fight in the 2022 assembly polls, thereby making the electoral battle more interesting and close enough to give sleepless nights to political leaders.

The SAD-BSP alliance, BJP-Captain Amarinder Singh-led front and the farmers' front, Sanyukt Samaj Morcha, were the direct fallout of the year-long farmers' movement and the internal rift within the ruling Congress.

The Aam Aadmi Party has turned giant-slayer in Punjab election 2022 with its candidates defeating heavyweights like outgoing chief minister Charanjit Singh Channi in Chamkaur Sahib and Bhadaur, Punjab Congress chief Navjot Singh Sidhu in Amritsar East, former Punjab CM Amarinder Singh in Patiala and Shiromani Akali Dal patriarch Parkash Singh Badal in Lambi.

In brief, Punjab Election 2022 seats have painted a completely different picture from the last Punjab election in which the Congress had won an absolute majority by winning 77 seats in the Punjab Vidhan Sabha, ousting the SAD-BJP government after 10 years. The AAP had emerged as the second-largest party, winning 20 seats. The Shiromani Akali Dal won 15 seats, while the BJP, which had a coalition government with the Akali Dal in Punjab from 2007 to 2017, secured three seats. The election mandate is a result of Punjab's yearning for a revolution, and not a rollicking love affair between the voters and the Aam Aadmi Party.

2.1 Factors which led to the win of AAP

There are number of factors which become the reason of winning AAP in Punjab. The dissatisfaction among public regarding the way in which state is being governed is the biggest reason behind the winning of party.

2.2 The farmers' movement

The most important reason is the gathered strength of farmers from Punjab who led a robust peasant protest that pressured the Union government to repeal the three farm laws. It not only brought the focus on the structural crises in the commodised agrarian economy in Punjab but also the systemic problems stemming from the rapid urbanisation.

2.3 Leadership of Dalits

The second churning is the political space that has been created for Dalit leadership.

The Congress was forced by the deep rooted factionalism in the party, Amarinder Singh's exit as the chief minister and the anti-incumbency wave to restructure its government four months before the impending assembly elections.

The Congress has politically juxtaposed Channi's Dalit Sikh image with AAP's forte of the celebrated *aam aadmi*. While the decision could have primarily been influenced by electoral considerations, it is also the Congress's strategy to appeal to Dalit voters by signalling its commitment to the principle of social justice.

2.4 AAP's ascendancy

The third moment of churning is the ascendancy of AAP in Punjab politics after its innings as the opposition in the state assembly. AAP has offered an electoral template that distinguishes itself from the mainstream political parties – SAD, BJP, Congress – that have alternated in power over the decades.

It has modelled a visible conglomeration of class-caste defined support structure. The organisational structure of AAP is geared towards an aggressive issue-based campaign that seeks to channelize mass discontent over unemployment, the drug trade-politician nexus, sand mining mafia and delivery of basic amenities like education and health. Since the pre-pandemic times, it has mobilised a substantial unit of foot soldiers from local areas to penetrate the hinterland. It has captured the populist imagination of indigenising the Delhi model of governance for Punjab.

3. Conclusion:

To conclude, development politics blended with politicisation of caste can become double engines for ushering in a new political culture in Punjab. The question is whether the undercurrent of churning will take the form of clear verdict or destabilise politics. The future of Punjab depends on the politics it chooses for itself.

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