

MOOD REPORT ON PUNJAB

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AAP SURGES AHEAD IN PUNJAB, BUT WHAT NEXT ?

Post-Anna movement, the emergence of Aam Admi Party (AAP), claiming the inheritance of anti-corruption discourse, though scored unexpected electoral success in its debutante 2013 Delhi Assembly election, proved to be a grand electoral failure in 2014 Lok Sabha election wherein it lost deposits at 413 seats out of 432 it contested. The only exception to the trend, surprisingly was Punjab where it won four seats out of 13 parliamentary constituencies. The political analysts ascribed AAP's victory to the phenomenon of 'double anti-incumbency' adversely affecting Congress (incumbent at national level) and Akali-BJP (incumbent at state level) besides electorates' disenchantment with the 'bi-polar polity' for its perceived complicity in the dreaded drug-issue, post-green revolution agrarian distress, rampant corruption, deindustrialization and rising unemployment.

In this backdrop, there are three pertinent questions at this juncture pertaining to the interplay of AAP and Punjab, namely, a) Would Punjab prove to be a dark horse for AAP in 2017 Assembly election even without the advantage of 'double anti-incumbency'? b) How would a victory in Punjab affect the internal dynamics of AAP? and, c) How would a possible electoral victory of AAP in Punjab-2017, bear upon the national political scenario? The answers to these questions, despite multiple 'ifs' and 'buts', are worth seeking given their potential constituting role in shaping the unfolding of dynamics of anti-BJP political space.

A longitudinal field study in Punjab reveals that despite several setbacks on account of organizational split and expulsions of leaders, AAP continues to hold the momentum gained in 2014 Lok Sabha election and have an 'off the block advantage' over others, which in turn, makes it a frontrunner for power in 2017. There is fourfold reason for the same.

Firstly, the dominant narrative of current political mood of the electorates happen to be a strong anti-Akali sentiment running high across the three sub-regions of Punjab, namely, Malwa, Majha and Doaba. However, the sub-narrative differs across the three sub-regions and social constituencies. While, in Malwa region that accounts for almost 60 percent of total assembly seats (69 out of 117) the unambiguous preferred alternative to incumbent Akalis happen to be AAP, Congress seems to have edge over AAP in Majha and Doaba region, accounting for 25 and 23 (21% and 20%) Assembly seats respectively. Hence, going by the electorates' articulations, it plausible that, in most of the constituencies, they would vote for a party that would ensure the defeat of Akalis. The fact that 34 of the 56 seats represented by incumbent Akalis fall in Malwa region, where AAP, as an alternative preference, is way ahead of Congress, placing the former not only in an advantageous position over the later in terms of reaping electoral dividends out of anti-Akali sentiment but also neutralizes the edge the Congress enjoys in other two regions.

Secondly, analyzed in terms of the shifting social base of respective parties, AAP again emerges as the default beneficiary as besides youths, facing the problems of unemployment and institutional corruption, enchanted by the theme of 'change and new party', a section of the Jatt-Sikhs, a dominant social constituency, traditionally the support base of Akalis, who also double as an occupational category as rural (rich, medium and poor) peasants primarily in Malwa and Majha region, are angry with incumbent Akalis, but have reservation to vote for Congress given their memory of 1984 riots, making AAP their first preference. Moreover, the 2015 issue of 'desecration of Guru Granth Sahib and subsequent police firing upon the protesting Sikhs' have not only angered the panthik (religious) minded Jatt-Sikh voters but also constituted.

AAP as the ‘New-Akali’- a phenomenon entrenched by the posturing by leaders like H.S Phoolka, whose credential as a crusader in seeking justice for 1984-riots victims remains undisputed, and massive support the party gains from NRI Jatt-Sikhs.

Thirdly, the ‘drug menace’ affecting the Malwa and Majha region in general and border districts in particular, have further compounded the post-green revolution agrarian distress, leading to the loss of a generation in many villages. The popular perception of senior Akali leaders patronizing the illicit drug trade; the constant denials by incumbent Akalis regarding the intensity of drug menace and their rejection of the issue as a ploy by opposition to defame Punjab; the reluctance of Congress to take up the issue, and; AAP’s raising the issue in an aggressive way by naming a senior minister as the patron of the drug trade; have enhanced AAP’s image as a better savior of Punjab vis a vis Congress, even though the AAP-Congress dynamics varies from region to region.

Fourthly, the ironical feature of Punjab being a state with highest percentage of Dalits (32%) without having a strong dalit politics on account of the community informed by fragmented, sub-regional, caste and religious fault-lines, continues to be the trend wherein the prospect of Congress getting a lion’s share of community votes would be partially affected by the incumbent government’s massive welfare and religious program earmarked exclusively for the Dalits as it may ensure a further split among their voting putting Congress at a disadvantage. Given the plausible bottomline that 2017 Punjab would have AAP in power- alone or in coalition- would impinge upon the personality centric politics of AAP as the state leader of the party in a full state like Punjab would wield more power than the same of Delhi, who remains handicapped due to asymmetric federal power structure. It would be interesting to see how this dynamic unfolds within AAP, once it tastes power in Punjab.

Going by the trend of Kejriwal and his close associates' discomfort with leaders of strong personality- a trait considered responsible for not promoting Navjot Singh Sidhu despite the perceived electoral dividend the move would have reaped- its speculated that some loyalist like Bhagwant Mann may be given the mantle of the state to ensure unchallenged position of Kejriwal. The speculation that Kejriwal himself would take the mantle in Punjab, in case AAP forms the government, seems implausible given his compulsion for functional freedom to play a role in national politics.

AAP as a party represents the societal craving to fill the political vacuum created by Congress wherein the socio-political space of Congressism is being captured by various regional parties, a majority of whom are responding to the political preponderance of BJP in two diametrically opposite ways, namely, one, by forging an anti-BJP alliance keeping Congress at the centre and second, by replacing Congress and claiming the space by presenting themselves as the most viable anti-BJP alternative. AAP represents the later trend of replacing Congress as the dominant centrist player in the national politics. A victory in Punjab means adding muscle to the AAP's armour and colossal awakening of maverick politician in Kejriwal who would not hesitate taking a plunge in Gujarat, to tap on Patels' anger, farmers distress and other faultlines, to outsmart Congress and place itself as the credible alternative to the anti-BJP constituencies in 2019 Parliamentary election. Whether, these AAP venturing would help consolidate the spaces deserted by Congress or would further fragment anti-BJP space and end up helping BJP is an aspect only time would answer but whose seed certainly lies in the electoral outcome of Punjab 2017.

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SHIFTING SOCIAL SUPPORT BASE AND POLITICAL STRATEGIES IN PUNJAB

The political dynamics of Punjab are fluid and any analysis of the same on the basis of past elections are fraught with privileging the apriori assumptions over fast changing ground realities. The political dynamics in Punjab have traditionally revolved around the axis of religion and caste duly contextualized by sub-regional specificities and various parties have drawn their core support base from various social contextualities.

SHIFTING SOCIAL SUPPORT BASE

The most visible shift among the core social support base happens to be among the traditionally Akali supporting panthic Jatt Sikhs who as a religious community feel betrayed by the ruling Akalis in the aftermath of three controversial incidents, namely, the pardoning of DeraSachcha Sauda Chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim by Akal Takht- a move that was revoked subsequently, discretion of Guru-Granth Sahib and subsequent police firing upon the protesting Sikhs. This section of the Jatt Sikhs is perceiving AAP as the ‘New-Akali’ on account of the latter’s claim to represent the interest of Sikhs.

Secondly, another visible shift that is taking place on the ground happen to be among the Dalits who are divided among caste and religious lines. For instance, a significant section of the Valmiki Hindu Dalits, who are considered the traditional support base of Congress in Punjab are likely to shift towards Akalis on account of latter’s focused welfare programs for the Dalits in general and the massive financial support given to build Valmiki Temple in Amritsar. Similarly, the Ravidasi/Chamar Dalit caste, primarily concentrated in Doaba region of the state have been, who have been voting for BSP in significant numbers are more likely to vote for Congress as they find no incentive in governments welfare programs on account of their relatively better-off economic status.

Thirdly, the core support base of BJP in urban constituencies, primarily among Hindu business communities like, Bania, Khatri and Aroras would witness a major shift towards both, AAP and Congress in the state on account of massive slump in the business, aloofness of the state government to their plight and the consequent trend of shifting of business firms to the neighboring states like Himachal Pradesh and Haryana for better incentives.

CHANGING POLITICAL STRATEGIES

In the backdrop of the shifting social base, the political parties are adopting a double pronged strategy for electoral mobilization. While the first set of their strategies are generic by making an appeal to each and every section of the society, the difference lies in the respective focus on various communities.

Having realized its weak political footings among Panthic Minded Jatt-Sikhs and middle class the Akalis are investing tremendously among the community by way of welfare policies and religious incentives to win their support as the community constitute 32 percent of the state population. Similarly, they are making subtle religious appeals in their village Programs highlighting the developmental achievement of their government in the past 10 years besides promising to come up with more incentives for the farmers- a fact the majority of electorates don't seem to be impressed with.

The Congress on the other hand, is aiming to prioritize the agrarian issue to win back a sizeable support of Jatt Sikhs constituting around 40 percent of the state population by announcing loan waivers for the farmer and taking the issue of Sutlej Yamuna Canal.

Finally, AAP is following a three pronged strategy for electoral mobilization by projecting itself; as a better champion of Sikhs religious interests by invoking the issue of 1984 and that of farmers by announcing loan waivers and subsidies on new loans; as a hope of the youths disenchanted by rising unemployment and drug menace, as a better alternative to small business community by promising riddance from the ‘law&order’ and ‘Kabja-mafias’.

However, the rhetorical edge that works in favour of AAP happen to be aggressive posturing against the Akali leaders and the polemics of sending their top ministers to Jail if voted to power. For Congress, the dominant image advantage happens to be its pro-farmer image, especially, that of Captain Amrinder Singh. For Akalis, the game is of survival and avoiding the massive political onslaught.

Interestingly, the AAP factor and its aggressive posturing vis-a-vis the traditional parties has made the political strategy among both Congress and Akalis murkier wherein they aim to invoke the sentiment of ‘Outsider vs. Punjabi’ factor besides constituting Kaejrival as a Haryanvi- a negative factor given the recent memory of Murthal Rape incident and Sutlej-Yamuna Canal dispute.

Additionally, AAP is also grappling with the problems of weak organizational presence and popular candidates, especially in Majha and Doaba region and seems to focus predominantly consolidate its position in Malwa region accounting for 69 out of 117 Assembly seats.

Thus, the existing scenario in Punjab signify a fluid political dynamics wherein the entry of AAP as a third alternative has not only unsettled the old political equations but also has led to a reversal of political strategies wherein the overarching priority of the incumbent Akalis is focused on winning over the sizeable Dalit constituency while the core of Jatt Sikhs is likely to shift towards the AAP. In this fast changing scenario the relative success or failure of; Akalis winning over the Dalits and succeeding in securing a section of their traditional Panthic Jatt-Sikh voters; Congress succeeding in prioritizing the agrarian issues; and AAP succeeding in placing itself as representative of both development and identity by projecting itself as ‘harbinger of change’ and being ‘New-Akalis’, would determine the new political equations in the ensuing Assembly election in Punjab.



PUNJAB FROM RELIGIOUS MILITANCY TO NARCO-TERRORISM

Much has been written about the prevailing drug menace in Punjab affecting a generation whose spillover effects may render 2010s as a withering decade for the state. Unfortunately, this critical issue has turned out to be a political match between the incumbent Akalis and nascent AAP wherein while the former cries conspiracy by the opposition and hostile media to defame Punjab, the later seems more interested in whipping the popular sentiment to earn political dividends out of the same. What is missing here is the very willingness to unravel the multi-causality of this problem signifying the precarious and gloomy socio-economic condition that Punjab has slipped into.

Based upon the inferences from peoples' narration in the state, the drug-menace in Punjab could be attributed to a complicated interplay of 'political economy' and 'social' factors constituting a maze that could be navigated through taking account of three dimensions.

Firstly, the very fact that the existing drug problem in Punjab proliferated disproportionately in the last six-seven years, points towards the underlying interconnected slippery slope of agrarian distress and declining educational and health system in rural area leading to rising cases of school drop-outs which compounds the problem of unemployed youths on account of lack of viable alternative employment avenues outside agriculture, who in turn, become easy prey to drug addiction. In this explanation, the declining socio-economic factors emerges as providing the fertile ground for the emergence of a social menace such as drug-issue in Punjab.

Secondly, the interconnected problem of agrarian distress, educational decline and rising unemployment gets slides into the ‘modus-operandi’ of drug cartel wherein as per the dominant account emerging from people, more particularly in the rural areas of Majha and Malwa region, the drug menace intensified on account of massive unemployment among youths who were exposed to the synthetic drugs primarily in the last 6-7 years pointing to the easy availability of the same. It was pointed out that a 2-gram sachet of this synthetic drug costs around Rs. 2000 which a drug-addict needs for a day, leading to the instances like many addicts turning either into drug-carrier working as the conduit between the supplier and addicts, or taking recourse to crimes like snatching and theft, ATM and Bank loot. Though, the security personnel are yet to admit the linkages between rising crimes and drug issues, the people in general are forthright about the same. Thus, the drug-problem in Punjab is circular wherein the socio-economic root cause and the consequent effect keep reinforcing each other.

Thirdly, the aspect of easy availability of the synthetic drugs, a massive shift from poppy husk, smack and heroin, in the last 5-6 years speaks volumes about the political patronage and power nexus that the drug cartel enjoys in the state. In fact, the name of a senior minister, popularly considered as the patron of drug-cartel, has become synonym with drug and it was frequently pointed out that the addicts ask for the stuff by referring to it by the minister’s name. This narration points out the emergence and entrenchment of the Drug-trade in the last one decade on account of the power nexus in the state.

In this backdrop, the core aspect concerning the source of the synthetic drugs that has been convincingly pointed to Pakistan by many reports reveal a pernicious agenda of ensuring a massive economic and social devastation in the state whose ramifications has the potential to hollow out the generational potential, making the menace a serious security issue. In the popular common sense in the state the security lapse in Pathankot incident is already being seen linked to the drug-cartel and naturally many analysts have referred to the drug-menace as Narco-Terrorism.

The holistic analysis of drug-menace points out that it's not just about trade or fancy hop culture but rather an interplay of the drug-cartel across the borders taking advantage of the agrarian and economic crisis of the state, targeting a generation, with disproportionately lesser effort and investment as compared to the active militancy or terrorism, by providing easy economic allurements to the power blocks in Punjab. Thus what Punjab is witnessing now is not mere an existence of parallel drug economy but a different form of terrorism by means of drugs. What is most unfortunate is the political boxing revolving around the issue among AAP and Akalis who are more interested in name calling and pointing out fingers at individuals rather than recognizing the security dimension of the problem.

In this time when internal security happens to be the main issue informing the research focus of the dominant research institutes dealing with policy recommendation on the same, it is a telling comment that none of them have taken this aspect of 'narco-terrorism' as a serious issue impairing the national-security. At the most some journalistic accounts have been made in this regard.

A respondent in Gurudaspur summarized the core of the problem in his telling remark that Punjab is passing through second phase of terrorism—from Khalistan to ‘Drug-Terrorism’. Already, the state lost one and half decade under religio-political militancy, now the celebrated ‘normalcy period’ post 1997 election seems to be a misnomer in the shadow of the menace of ‘narco-terrorism’ that is hollowing the state silently. Its time when the political parties trates this issue beyond the electoral agenda and move away from their measured response of either denying the problem or blaming the political opponent lest the 2010s turns out to be a ‘withering decade’ for Punjab.



DALITH INDETITY IN PUNJAB

The Dalit question in Punjab is characterized by three sets of ironies revolving around the quasi-incommensurable gap between ‘social’ and ‘political’ dimensions. First and foremost, with a 32 percentage of Dalit population Punjab has the distinction of being highest concentration of Dalits with no assertive Dalit politics at par with states like Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. Secondly, despite having an avant-garde early Dalit political movement in the form of Mangu Ram led Ad-Dharm movement in 1920s, the Dalit discourse never witnessed a consolidation in the state. Thirdly, their socio-economic aspects and consequent aspirations are manifested primarily through cultural assertions giving precedence to ‘cultural politics’ over other political aspects of the community.

As per census 2011 and other government data, Dalits in Punjab constitute 32% of total population which is close to double to the national average. Among them, an overwhelming section, 73%, is spatially located in rural area while 26% is located in urban area. Also, the community constitutes 62% of the total ‘BPL’ family in the state, owns a mere 6% of operational land holding that is mainly non-agrarian despite constituting more than 40% of the population in 40% of total villages and close to 25-30% in the rest.

It was as early as in 1920s that Mangu Ram led Ad-Dharm movement in Doaba region heralded an assertive Dalit politics, that signified a transformative potential for acting as agents of egalitarian change by articulating the voice of the marginalized. The Ad-Dharm movement merged later with other political outfits like ‘Ambedkar Schedule Caste Front’ and thereupon transformed into Republican Party of India and subsequently faded away without ever bringing the non-Chamar/Ravidas/Ramdas Dalits like Balmikis and Mazhabi Hindus in its fold.

Officially, there are 37 Dalit castes in Punjab, a majority of whom could broadly be divided into two categories, constituting around 82% of community population, with distinct socio-economic and sub-regional characteristics. The first category is constituted of two prominent Dalit castes, namely Mazhabi Sikhs and Hindu Balmikis, who trace their origin to Chuhra caste. The second category of Dalits is comprised of Adi-Dharmis/Chamars/ Ravidasi and Ramdasi-Sikhs, who originally belong to Chamar caste. BSP founder Kanshi Ram belonged to Ramdasi-Sikh caste from Roopnagar district falling in Doaba region. Sub-regionally, the former are predominantly located in Malwa and Majha region while the later are more concentrated into Doaba region. In terms of the urban-rural dimension, the overwhelming majority of Mazhabi Sikhs and a significant section of balmikis are located in rural areas engaged as farm labourers in the fields of landed Jatt-Sikhs, while a majority of Chamar and a significant number of Balmikis are found in urban centres wherein while the former have witnessed occupational diversities on account of their early exposure to economic opportunities, the later are primarily confined to scavenging and cleaning jobs.

These divergent intra-Dalit socio-political dynamics in Punjab translated into fragmented politico-cultural articulations by various Dalit sub-castes wherein the cultural aspects constituted the political response. Way back in early 1970s in the wake of fusing religio-agrarian identity of Sikhs started posing a serious challenge to the political dominance of Congress, the party responded by appointing a non-Jatt Sikh, Giani Zail Singh, carpenter by caste, as the Chief Minister of state, who driven by the twin aims of uplifting the most backward Mazhabi-Sikh and Balmiki Dalits and ensuring a social cleavage in the politics of unified Sikh identity played from the vantage point of the upper caste Jatt-Sikhs, came up with a 1975 government notification of reserving half of Schedule Caste quota of 25% in state government jobs exclusively for these two Dalit castes.

As a congress leader he aimed to win over the two dalit cases as there were speculation that the emerging primacy of religious political framework may consolidate the Mazhabi-Sikhs to the fold of Akalis and Balmikis to that of Jan-Sangh. Similarly, by mid-1980s, with the emergence of BSP, the Chamar/Adi-Dharmis/Ravidasi/Ramdasi-Sikhs, shifted significantly to its fold by deserting Congress- a pattern continued till 1997 when BSP as a potential Dalit party in Punjab declined on account of its Chamar caste centric outlook, factionalism, splits and failure to respond to the political aspiration of Mazhabi-Sikh and Balmiki Dalits.

Thus, the failure of the emergence of a unified Dalit politics despite having assertive social movements on the ground leads to the primacy of caste-centric 'cultural-politics' among various Dalit groups who despite the egalitarian rhetoric compete with each other rather than striving for solidarity and alliance. Interestingly, the cultural politics of Dalit caste groups mediates through the institutions of various Deras who challenge the cultural hegemony of Jatt-Sikhs who control institutions like SGPC. These cultural assertions of various Dalit groups, via religious symbols are primarily caste centric wherein one finds the cult of saint Ravidas catapulted by the efforts of Dera Sachkhand Ballan in Doaba that has huge following among the Chamar Dalits, the ongoing construction of spectacular Valmiki temple at Amritsar to which the Balmiki Dalits are enamored with, the building of separate Gurudwars by Mazhabi-Sikh Dalits in the villages and their recourse to various Deras like Sacha Sauda. This primacy of religious metaphor in cultural assertion is also reflected in fusing Ambedkar with saint Ravidas by Chamar Dalits who are also competing with the cultural hegemony of Jatt-Sikh being the romanticized identity as the representative of Punjabi-self in music industry. The emergence of Punjabi-pop groups singing the verses of Saint Ravidas or the euphoric popularity of 'Chamar-Rap' by Ginni Mahi, points to the caste centric cultural politics informing the Dalit groups in Punjab.

In this fragmented Dalit discourse, the role of respective Deras, the caste centric appeal of various political parties and the intra-caste dynamics would emerge as the potential determinants of electoral articulations by various Dalit caste groups. The fact that, Akalis are appealing to Balmikis by taking Balmiki Yatra throughout the state and allocating sumptuous funds for the construction of Valmiki temple at Amrtisar, the Congress promising allocation of land for the Mazhabi Dalits, BJP recent appointment of a Dalit as its state chief and AAP declaration of Dalit being a deputy C.M in recent rally at Jalandhar, endorses the existing fragmented Dalit political articulation mediated through the primacy of caste-centric cultural assertions.

