

PunjAAP 2017 and Beyond?

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 bottom-line 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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