

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controversial incidents, namely, the pardoning of DeraSachcha Sauda Chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim by Akal Takht- a move that was revoked subsequently, discretion of Guru-Granth Sahib and subsequent police firing upon the protesting Sikhs.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.

CONCLUSION

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; ad 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.

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