

Insight of Punjab Polls 2022 : Game for Spoilers and Theatrics.....by Dr Pramod Kumar

Published On : Feb 14, 2022 12:00 AM



Punjab election has everything in it except seriousness to bring about an urgently needed paradigm shift in the development path. It has entertainment, Sidhuism, theatrics, and is garnished with 'Punjab ka Dard', 'Punjab De Lokan Da Dard' - Punjab Model of Development, and course, Delhi Model of Governance for Punjab.

All this creamy-layered garnishing is nothing, but a bouquet of freebies to bribe the voters. It has become a battle royale of false claims and empty promises to entice the common voters. It has a preponderance of a winnable tag hopping from one party to another. The winnability is philosophically paraphrased as *Jeet hi Dharam hai*, rubbishing the age-old notion of *Dharam ki Jeet*.

Even when they happily surrender to political opportunism, they continue to claim that their heart is in the right place, as pure and honest as ever. Corruption is bad and honesty is good. Personal honesty has a higher value because it is scarce. And it is marketed as a superior value to the fight against hunger, poverty, inequality, greed, conspicuous consumption, and corruption.

This situation, acts as an invitation to those who have proved their worth in their respective professions, ranging from cinema to sports to social activism. These 'celebrities' with their reservoir of social credit drift into politics. They have a dual advantage of being mass leaders and aggressive appropriators of the space created by the propagation of 'honesty' as a supreme value rather than a historical struggle against capital accumulation, inequalities, hunger, and poverty. They use the small screen to make their concerns appear pro-people.

And mock drills are organized to look democratic and to ask the people to elect their Chief Ministerial face just before the elections. Is the politics of Punjab has become ideologically freak and politically rudderless?

An Election of Many Firsts

Punjab's electoral politics has undergone a qualitative shift. It has transformed from a two-party rotational system to a multi-party contest leading to the crowding of the electoral space.

This election shall witness a three-cornered contest between the Congress, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)- Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), with the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP)-Punjab Loktantrik Congress (PLC)- Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD Sanyukt) putting up some semblance of a fight in some targeted constituencies.

The Sanyukt Samaj Morcha (SSM), a conglomerate of 22 farm organizations, may change the architecture of Punjab elections. It may share the votes seeking change which, in turn, may adversely affect the winning chances of AAP.

The SSM's negotiations with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) failed as they publicly alleged that they were selling party tickets and indulging in malpractices to manipulate a win in Punjab. How far SSM shall be able to woo the voters?

Given that the Punjab electoral space so far has remained inclusive of various fault lines, notwithstanding, the insignificant space for exclusive support bases amongst the urban Hindus, the Scheduled Castes, and the rural Jat peasantry. The rural Jat peasantry ruled the State since the mid-sixties as a hegemonic class without having a majority vote share.

Therefore, it is likely that the SSM may act as a mega spoiler rather than winning a few seats.

Political Alliances: Carving New Electoral Space

Another distinct feature is the formation of new electoral alliances in Punjab. Historically, Punjab politics is marked by opulence, mega-alliances, and amnesia too. It has ironically liberated the political parties and leaders from the shackles of ideology, principled positions, and consistent normative behavior.

In this election, the BJP has entered into a pre-election alliance with the breakaway parties from the Congress Punjab Loktantrik Congress (Amarinder) and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD Sanyukt).

In this alliance, the BJP has elevated itself as a dominant partner with 65, the Punjab Loktantrik Congress 37, and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD Sanyukt) 15. It is widely believed that this alliance may become functional in select constituencies, but in majority constituencies, though not successful for its candidates, it may adversely affect the chances of the Congress party.

Whereas, the SAD has not allied with its traditional ally, the BJP, due to the farmers' protest and their disagreement on three Acts on agriculture. The SAD allied with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). These parties have allied after two and a half decades. Their performance in the 1996 Parliamentary Elections was spectacular. The SAD 8, and the BSP 3 seats won out of 13 seats.

This alliance may give an advantage to the SAD as in the previous elections, the BSP acted as the mega spoiler for the SAD in more than 15 seats. The impact of the alliance would be easily discernible in the Doaba region and in some parts of the Malwa region of Punjab.

Mobilizing Exclusive Vote Banks

There are blatant efforts to polarize Punjab on religious and caste lines. It has been propagated that if Punjab has a Sikh Chief Minister or a Scheduled Caste Chief Minister, that may act as a game-changer.

On the contrary, the multi-cornered contests and demographically different electoral alliances in terrain have evolved to place the urban Hindus and Dalits as the game-changers. Given this, it would be an electoral misadventure to cultivate exclusive support bases. There are only 10 Jat majority, 2 Dalit majority, and 3 non-Jat general category majority constituencies in Punjab. In other words, more than 102 constituencies are diversity-sensitive.

For instance, the Scheduled Castes constitute more than 32 percent of the total population in Punjab, and yet do not affirm to be a homogenous group. Sixty percent of the SCs are followers of the Sikh religion, and the remaining 40 per cent are Hindus.

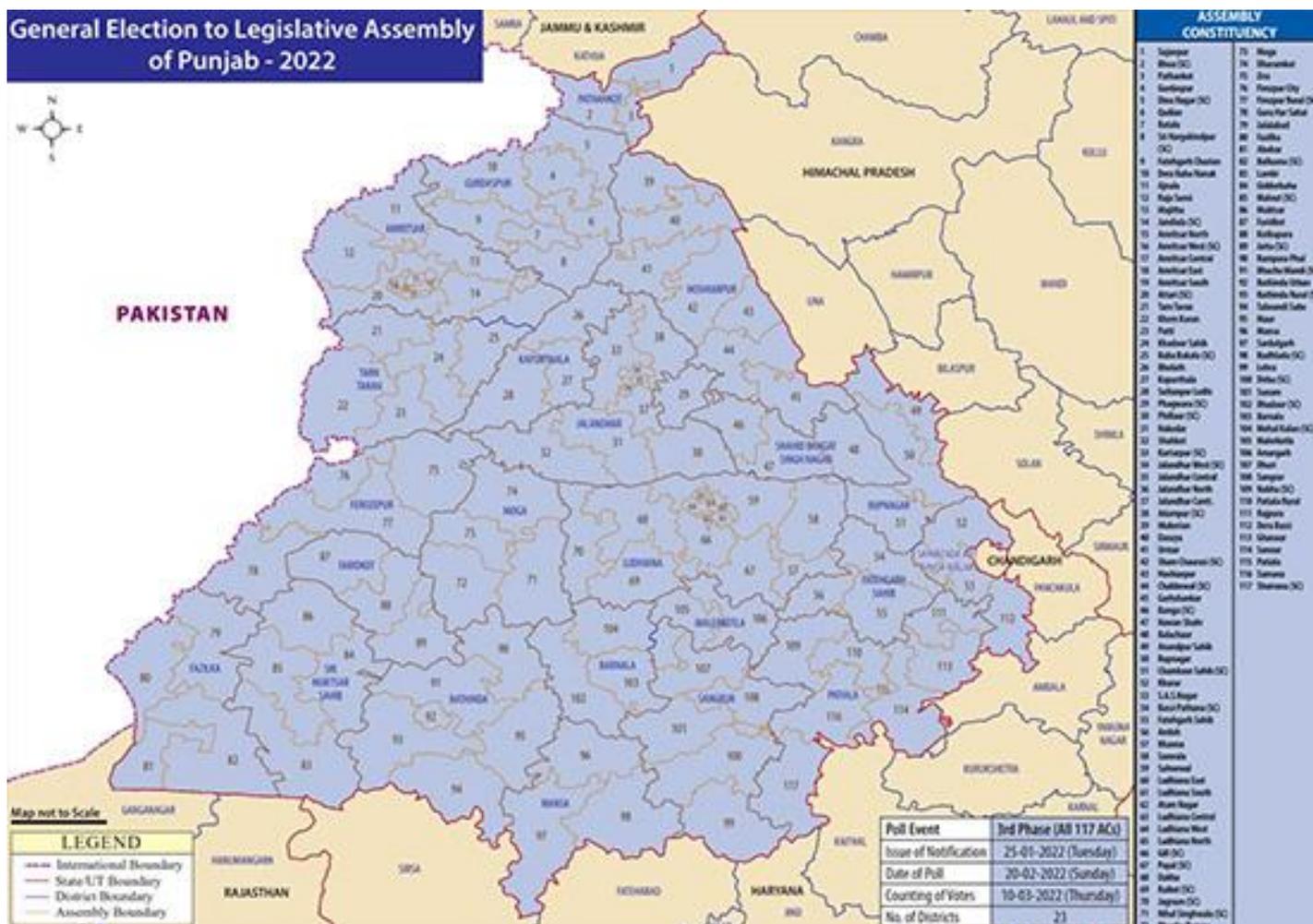
As a consequence, they have not developed as an exclusive caste vote bank and are not represented in politics by a caste-based party. Amongst themselves, the Scheduled Castes are fragmented into number of constituencies Mazhabis (23), Ad-dharmis (17), Ravidasia (9), Valmikis (3), and Rai Sikh (3) accounting for 80 per cent of the total Scheduled Castes.

Like other identities, caste in Punjab has its own regional flavour. Not only this, the other existing fault-lines of religion and caste have been represented by the competing political parties. For instance, the SAD, which has mainly been a party of the Jat-Sikh peasants, gave representation to the Punjabi Hindus with 9 out of 56, SAD legislatures, and 4 out of 15 legislatures in 2012 and 2017 assembly elections respectively. In 2022 elections, they have more than 10 Hindu candidates.

The BJP, which largely represents a section of urban Hindus, gave representation to the Sikhs also. Similarly, Congress made inroads into the SAD support base of the rural Jat Sikhs by fielding an equal number of the rural Jat Sikhs with the SAD. Thus, Punjab's electoral politics has shown signs of blurred religious and caste fault-lines.

To mobilize the people as exclusive categories, like Hindu Banias, Scheduled Castes, or Jat Sikhs may not bring the desired electoral results, unlike the other Indian States. Punjab has been known for its liberal religious practices about caste. Both Sikhism and the Arya Samaj liberated the Punjabi society including the Dalits from the stringent purity – pollution-based behavioral patterns. Politics continue to function in religion-caste domain engaging citizens with several cultural possibilities and choices.

The arenas of politics have been the village, kinship, religion and sects. These have transcend religious and caste barriers. There is no concept of ideological puritarianism. At the village level, factions shift their loyalty in opposition to the other.



Relevance of Channi Factor: First Scheduled Caste Chief Minister

The appointment of a Scheduled Caste Chief Minister, Charanjit Singh Channi has posed a question, “shall Scheduled Castes vote as an exclusive category for a particular political leader or a political party in this election or they will continue to vote for all the political parties as they have been doing in earlier elections?”

The nomination of Charanjit Singh Channi may give a psychological spin to Dalits. It may consolidate a section of Ravidasia and Ramdasias vote behind the Congress. But the reverse consolidation of Jat peasants and urban Hindus with other parties can't be ruled out. Further, cultural and the regional differences between the Scheduled Castes may continue to remain and respond differently in the elections. Charanjit Singh Channi, belongs to the Ramdasias bhaichara. How far would the other sub-castes, i.e., Majhabis, Rai and Sansi Sikhs, Balmikis, vote as an exclusive group for the Congress, is a moot question?

Further, these sub-castes are intermeshed with the Deras, which are the shrines of the saints operating outside the ritualistic domain of the institutionalized religions.

These Deras have acquired moral superiority by liberating their devotees from vices like drugs, drunkenness, and have been efficiently providing access to health services or subsidized food etc. The blind faith of these devotees is traded as votes by the self-styled Godmen. Many of the devotees belonged to the Scheduled Caste community affiliated to different competing Deras; for instance, a majority of the Ravidasias and Ramdasias are affiliated with the **Dera Ballan**, and a section of the **Mazhabis** are affiliated with the **Dera Sacha Sauda** and so on.

So, it would be the **Dera** establishment that may continue to barter their support in elections with the competing political parties, and the Channi factor may only exercise a very limited influence amongst the Scheduled Castes. Together, these **Deras** can exercise decisive influence in around 56 constituencies. The *Radha Soami* in 19, *Dera Sacha Sauda* in 15, *Dera Nurmahal* in 8, *Dera Nirankari* in 4, *Dera Ballan* in 8, *Dera Namdhari* in 2 constituencies. It is unlikely that the attempt of the Congress party to polarize Punjab electoral space on caste lines shall work to their advantage.

Grammar of Politics

Elections have been reduced to a ritual of democracy and just a matter of perceptions and popularity ratings of the leaders, and not of the political parties. And, the only slogan audible changes. '**Change for whom and for what remains ambiguous**'.

Political parties in Punjab are bugged by the new buzz word change – giving guarantees for freebies and doles and selective targeting of the political adversaries as a substitute for competitive politics, i.e., killing poison with poison and allowing the patient to die. Having shed their ideological positions, a culture of personalized politics is being nurtured and even institutionalized. Strangely, the agenda of politics have not been shaped by the one-year-long farmer's protests. The issues relating to the agriculture crisis could not become dominant.

The political battle is being fought on Doles, religion and caste aithmetic rather than on the development, agricultural reforms and/or on governance, peace and communal harmony. Election Commission must evolve the electoral code of conduct for political parties for giving signed guarantee for freebies, for example, giving one thousand rupees to every women. These promised expenses should be added to the election expenses of the candidates or their election should be countermand.

The overall approach has been to use cocktail of doles and promises containing something for everyone's taste.

So, we have in this election **Menu-festo** rather than Manifesto. There is a menu card for the farmers, traders, students, dalits, industrialists, women, etc., to cater to everyone's taste replacing the Manifesto which is, by definition, a declaration of the principles, policies, intention and, of course, ideological commitment. The credit for this infamous invention goes to AAP.

During elections, political parties promise jobs, doles, subsidies and when in government, they reduce employment in the public sector for improving the fiscal health of the state. They exhort people to look after their own health and give subsidies to private hospitals and impose user charges. This all is done without addressing the issues concerning livelihood.

Political parties, however, are not expected to confess, particularly at the time of elections, that they have ceased to govern. When the market is allowed to govern, the government becomes powerless. Having become powerless, they promise '*Ghar Ghar Naukri*'. This is farce. Also the proponents of market reforms have no plans for those who do not have the resources and income to buy even two meals a day. These poorer sections of society are reduced to mere victims, beneficiaries, clients and recipients. In other words, a patron-client relationship defines the boundary conditions for electoral discourse.

An interesting example is a manner in which even the real issue of drugs have been raised in Punjab. Isn't it interesting that after more than three decades of using drugs to woo the voters, politics has now realised that the noises against drug abuse can get them more political dividends? Hence, each one is trying to outcompete the others in the blame game. There are claims that the drugs problem can be eradicated in four weeks by the competing political parties. Politics over drugs has become more serious than the problem itself.

Political parties have not cared to analyse the reasons and ways to raise the purchasing capacity of the poor. How has the pauperisation and land alienation of the farmers become endemic? Why has the demand for drugs and alcohol multiplied among the youth? What are the ways to check the demand and increase avenues for productive engagement of the youth? Have these questions lost their relevance? Going by the manifestoes of the political parties, it would appear so. The only purpose is to look different even it this difference does not make a difference. This is branded as 'change'.

Dehumanise Discourse

The electorate seems to be fed up with the mudslinging theatrics of the political parties. The use of derogatory language is not a novelty in electoral politics, albeit a normalized behaviour. The past elections (assembly or parliamentary) have witnessed politicians calling opposition leaders myriad of things from cats, dogs, snakes, mongoose, calf, wolves, elephant, while the female candidates were being called as the bar-dancers or mocked for their physical appearances etc. This election has seen new low. The derogatory language has become normal that every other press conference might need a censor board of its own before broadcasting it publicly.

For example, Punjab Congress President in a press conference used the expletive (cuss word 'BC'). However, he appeared to be unflustered by the situation and continued to address the press conference. Nothing seems to 'shame' the loose cannons in the political arena.

The leaders are openly calling each other as '**Scamsters**' and boasted about the capacity of their own party leaders, that they could make the policemen wet their pants; And a senior leader of the Congress party labeled Arvind Kejriwal as '**Kale Angrez (Black Britisher)**' trying to annex Punjab.

Another newbie on this battlefield is virtual campaigning, as the Election Commission of India had put a ban on physical rallies and roadshows. These virtual campaigns are not far behind in using such derogatory remarks through memes, cartoons, parody videos, etc.

Each political party has its own special section dedicated to such means AAP recently released a comic on its CM face, Bhagwant Mann, in which he claimed that some leaders have power, some leaders have money, but he only has the blessings of the mothers. In contrast, SAD has launched a show 'Siyaapa' which consists of various series such as '100 lies of Kejriwal', 'The Thugs of Punjab', etc. Apart from the AAP and the SAD, the Congress also used such tactics to alleged involvement of a leader with the drug dealers, and the BJP and the AAP attacked the Congress rule in Punjab as Anti-Hindu.

How will the 2022 Elections Shape up?

The divisive politics, issueless campaigns, heavy doses of doles and invoking of religious **Deras** – all that constitutes the subtext of this election. The electoral alliances and failure to enter into alliances shall influence the outcomes. The SAD shall gain because of their alliance with the BSP and the AAP shall be at a disadvantage due to its failure to enter into alliance with Sanyukt Samaj Morcha (SSM). The vote share of the Aam Aadmi Party declined from 24% in 2014 to 7% in the 2019 elections.

In all the constituencies except Bathinda, Sangrur and Khadoor Sahib, the vote share of both the losing and the winning party, i.e., the Congress, and the Akali Dal has increased at the expense of the Aam Aadmi Party. The AAP has an advantage as it does not have any historical baggage and has not located itself in any faultlines of caste, religion or region. It has largely followed a 'catch all' approach. This is working to the advantage of the AAP. The SAD has a baggage of the sacrilege cases or allegations but it has an advantage of having a stable and socially acceptable leadership across various faultlines and an experienced leader in Sukhbir Badal as compared to Bhagwant Mann of AAP and Navjot Sidhu and Charanjit Channi of the Congress.

And the Congress is in a self-destructive mode. Metaphorically, the Punjab Congress is divided into five Misals (to use Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Governance Model), i.e. Sidhu Misal, Channi Misal, Bajwa Misal, Jakhar Misal and Randhawa Misal. Unfortunately, there is no Maharaja Ranjit Singh to coordinate these warring confederates. Hence, they are working overtime to outmanoeuvre each other and bound to adversely affect the winning chances of the Congress party.

All the three main parties are in close contest. As of now, there are indications that the Punjab is heading for a hung Assembly. Since it is crowding of the electoral space, the margins of win are going to be low. It would be a political misadventure to predict the outcome in favour or against a political party. But it can be safely concluded that as a minimalistic analysis, the SAD may be part of any government formation – including the BJP or the AAP and even the Congress, in a hung situation.

Punjab needs a paradigm shift.

To outcompete one another, all parties have rained sops rather than initiating a debate on policies to diversify the economy for generation of employment and income multiplication of the farmer's crisis in agriculture, for sustainable development like initiating water harvesting mission, building political consensus against drug abuse, suggesting policies for productive engagement of youth and women empowerment.

The electoral discourse as usual shows that there has been an erosion of ideological support base, political leadership deficit, and absence of transformational agenda.

Feb 13, 2022

Click to read this article in Punjabi

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rsR4_M56PwB2C_GdNd5yZWRwWGVqtws/view?usp=sharing



Dr Pramod Kumar , The writer is a Social Scientist, Research Expert and Director, IDC, Chandigarh
krpramod.idc@gmail.com

Disclaimer : The opinions expressed within this article are the personal opinions of the writer/author. The facts and opinions appearing in the article do not reflect the views of Babushahi.com or Tirchhi Nazar Media. Babushahi.com or Tirchhi Nazar Media does not assume any responsibility or liability for the same.