

# Punjab, unlike other states, has been known to resist a national electoral wave

The four-cornered contest between the Akalis, BJP, Congress and AAP will lead to a division of votes. The Congress appears to be the major beneficiary, followed by the AAP.

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Punjab has carved an electoral path of its own. Here, there are no alliances amongst political parties, no INDIA bloc and no NDA, no exclusive vote banks based

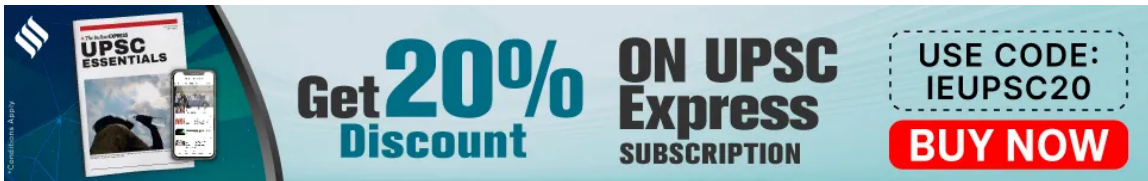
on religion or caste, even as there are the same tribes of party-hoppers and footloose voters. The national narrative of Ram Mandir nirman, Mandal, OBC reservation or apprehensions of subversion of the Constitution are hardly a part of the mainstream narrative in the state. It has a story of farmers' grievances, sharing of river waters, transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, and Indo-Pak trade apart from issues of infrastructure development, quality education, drug de-addiction, and youth engagement. All these are being garnished with the incumbent AAP's Delhi Model of governance for the state.

Punjab has a rich history of political mergers, alliances and coalitions. The formation of such alliances goes back to colonial Punjab. Uneasy, but many times historically necessary alliances were arrived at. In reorganised Punjab, four post-election coalitions between 1967 and 1980, and three pre-election coalitions during 1997 and 2019 were formed between the [BJP](#) and Akali Dal. At the national level, however, the coalition became central to the putting together of the government in the period post-1989, with 1977 an exception.

Unlike many other states, Punjab has had no exclusive vote banks based on religion or caste. These categories are intertwined and enmeshed. For instance, Scheduled Castes constitute more than 33 per cent of the total population and are segmented into Mazhabis, Chamars, Ad-dharmis and Balmikis and are not represented by any caste-based party. The vote share of the [Bahujan Samaj Party](#) (BSP) has been continuously declining. It has come down from 8 per cent in 2004 to 3.53 per cent in 2012 and 2 per cent in 2019. Data shows that the majority of SC legislators have got elected from parties other than the BSP — around 16 per cent of the SC members between 1967 and 2022 belonged to the BJP, 28 per cent to the Akalis, 23 per cent to Congress.

Punjab does not prop up an exclusive Hindu vote bank. In the 2014 Parliament elections, the BJP could not garner votes of urban Hindus even when the Hindutva wave was sweeping other parts of the country. Reformism within Hindus was guided more by the search for an identity to defend their faith from Christian missionaries, Islam and the Sanatan orthodoxy. This can be attributed to the role played by religious reform movements, particularly Sikhism, Arya Samaj, and Brahma Samaj. Hindus have dominant traits of Sikhism, and a normative behaviour influenced by the Arya Samaj and Sanatan Dharma both.

Thus, given that Punjab's electoral politics shows the blurring of religious and caste fault-lines, mobilising the people as part of exclusive categories, like Hindu traders or SCs, may not bring the desired electoral results.



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There is a four-cornered contest as the political parties have not entered into alliances. Congress and the AAP decided to go solo after their alliance talks could not reach fruition as the Punjab unit of Congress opposed it. It argued that an alliance with the AAP would negate the mandate of the people to perform the role of the opposition. In turn, it would help the Akalis to emerge as the main opposition and encash the anti-incumbency faced by the AAP government. It was argued by the Congress leadership that it would have been suicidal to barter its support base for a short-term advantage at the national level. In Punjab, Congress is the frontrunner in more than half of the constituencies.

The AAP created a new binary in the 2022 Assembly elections, that is, traditional parties versus the party for change. It clubbed all parties, ranging from Congress and Akalis to BJP, and branded them as corrupt. Now, after two years in power, the AAP in Punjab appears to have lost the plot. However, its performance in the ongoing polls will largely depend on its paternalistic welfarism, whereby freebies have been offered across the population. How far will the implementation of free electricity for all, upto 300 units, give dividends to AAP, is the question.

The Akalis and the BJP could not enter into an alliance as the Akali Dal insisted on conditions, including legal guarantees for [MSP](#) for crops and release of Sikh prisoners after completion of their jail terms.

The emergence of the regional space has been largely influenced by the farmers' protests, which acted as one of the filters for the alliance between the BJP and SAD. The BJP has to regionalise its agenda, as the narrative of [Ram Mandir](#) and its corporatised approach to agriculture may have implications for election outcomes. The Akalis have a regional agenda, with issues relating to federalism, Indo-Pak trade, crisis of agriculture and increasing youth unemployment. It may also be able to consolidate its panthic constituency.

The BJP does not have a Punjab-specific agenda, particularly for the Punjabi Hindus, who, unlike other minorities, do not suffer any sense of persecution or siege. Merely importing turbaned Sikh leaders may not transform it into a Punjab party. It has the advantage of having Sunil Jakhar as BJP state president, known for his sharp pro-Punjab positioning. But the non-fulfillment of promises of doubling the income of farmers and legalising MSPs has returned to haunt the BJP.

The absence of an alliance between the Akalis and the BJP may have provided fodder to the radicals. In this election, the fringe radicals are getting a notable

response from the youth, mainly in Khadoor Sahib and Faridkot constituencies. Their main emphasis is on the denial of justice to the Bandi Sikhs (Sikh prisoners incarcerated in various cases for years), exodus of youth from Punjab and the migration to the state of labour from Bihar and [Uttar Pradesh](#).

The mainstream political parties have allowed the fringe radicals to appropriate space in the religious or panthic constituency. The negation of the agenda of peace and communal harmony, and one-upmanship in power politics, has weakened the moderate space. This is disquieting.

The four-cornered contest between the Akalis, BJP, Congress and AAP will lead to a division of votes. The Congress appears to be the major beneficiary, followed by the AAP and the Akalis might be able to consolidate their support base. The BJP may, on limited seats, gain from this flux.

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