

REVISED

PUNJAB : CHANGING POLITICAL AGENDA

If the mid-twentieth century was a period of the consolidation of nationalism into nation states, the last decade of this century witnessed the assertion of sub-nationality identities. It seems that the bone and flesh of a self-determined nation state is either being substituted by redefined (not organic) sub-nationalities on the part of the people or by an aggressive state-controlled nation.

These redefined and reformulated sub-nationality identities have also acquired fundamentalist overtones as it has happened in Punjab, India. These fundamentalist assertions have reinforced the 'traditional purity of culture' and perceived the dominant culture as a threat to its existence. The interaction of these fundamentalist assertions and the mono-cultural nature of the state-controlled nation with the multi-cultural social reality has created conditions for conflicts.

The gradual process of de-democratisation of politics and flouting of the precious facet of democracy coupled with the steady erosion of the vitality of democratic institutions, has presented violence as a viable form of grievance redressal mechanism in the eighties. Terrorism in Punjab resulted in the killing of more than ten thousand people. It fractured the social fabric and blunted the sensibilities of the people.

These developments made democratic institutions and processes, political parties and moderate leadership irrelevant. Liberal political parties, having lost control over political events, could not articulate and further their ideological and political programmes. The agenda for politics was dictated by the hardliners within the Sikh politics and the repressive state apparatus.

Much of the politics in the eighties was nurtured by fundamentalist ideology, ruthless political and administrative acts, and protagonists of brutal and senseless killing. The democratic modes of protest and interest articulation were rendered ineffective. Institutions necessary for the functioning of representative democracy were also undermined.

The revival of democratic processes in the nineties witnessed active assertion of the people for setting the agenda for elections and exercising their right to vote. In a sample survey conducted by the Institute for Development and Communication (IDC) on the eve of 1997 elections clearly indicated that the people had realised the value of democracy. They asserted that democracy, howsoever, corrupt, inefficient and ineffective is better than whimsical fanatic terrorism. It is in this context, that about 49 per cent of the sampled voters mentioned that even if the political parties did not fulfil their promises they would continue to exercise their right to vote to keep the democratic system functional¹ (IDC sample survey, 1997). This was the lesson of ten years of violent turmoil in Punjab.

Elections and Revival of Democratic Process

The 1992 Lok Sabha elections were, therefore, a major step towards the revival of normal democratic processes. Even though, in this election around 24 per cent of the people voted and it was labeled as 'an apology for a representative character of democratic polity' (Table - 1)

Table - 1
Percentage of votes polled in the Lok Sabha elections (Punjab) 1967-1998

S.No.	Year	Percentage of Votes Polled
1.	1967	71.1
2.	1971	59.9

¹ Pramod Kumar, 'Transcending the divide'. Deccan Herald, Bangalore 16 February, 1997

3.	1977	66.8
4.	1980	62.7
5.	1984	67.6
6.	1989	62.7
7.	1992	24.0
8.	1996	62.0
9.	1998	60.07

Source: Election Commission Reports, India

This was the lowest turn-out since the reorganisation of Punjab in 1966. Punjab had the highest turn-out of 72 per cent in the 1969 mid-term elections, which ushered Punjab into the era of coalition politics (See table - 2). However, the percentage of votes polled continued to decline gradually since 1969 with 62.67 per cent votes polled in the 1989 Lok Sabha elections. In the 1992 Lok Sabha elections the decline was unprecedented and was perhaps due to the exceptional political situation. The turn-out was the lowest in the Jat dominated rural areas. It was the highest in the urban areas.²

Table - 2
Percentage of votes polled in Vidhan Sabha elections (Punjab) 1967-1997

S.No.	Year	Percentage of Votes Polled
1.	1967	71.2
2.	1969	72.3
3.	1972	68.63
4.	1977	65.4
5.	1980	64.3
6.	1985	67.5
7.	1992	23.82
8.	1997	68.73
9.	2002	63.0 (Provisional)

Source: Election Commission Reports, India 1967 - 1997

The response of the rural population was naturally apathetic since they constituted the Akali base. Thus in the 1992 elections, the turn-out in the rural areas was the least with 15.1 per cent participation, and it increased with the level of urban settlement (Table 3).

Table - 3

² See Pramod Kumar and Yadav, Y., The Real Context in Punjab, The Tribune, Chandigarh 9 February, 1992

Urban-rural turn-out

Constituencies	Assembly Elections		Lok Sabha (Assembly segmentwise)
	1985	1992	1996
Urban (12)	57.7	38.3	56.6
Semi-urban (11)	67.8	26.5	64.4
Semi-rural (24)	68.4	25.3	62.8*
Rural (70)	68.8	15.1	

Source : *The Tribune*, Feb. 9, 1992 and *Frontline*, June 14, 1996.

* This figure is calculated for both semi-rural (24) and rural (70)

In terms of electoral politics, the 1997 election experienced record participation of the people in the post-1967 phase. Around 80 per cent of the people voted as against 23.69 per cent in the 1992 elections (Refer to table 2).

The main reason for this massive turn-out has been the people's assertion of their faith in the democratic mode for the redress of their grievances and also due to the return of competitive politics in Punjab after 12 years.

However, the representative character of democracy got a boost with the January, 1993, elections to the grass-root institutions like the Panchayats and municipalities. The massive participation³, in these elections was presented as a vote against terrorism, which by implication legitimised the Congress rule in the state.

Further, the 1997 Assembly elections marked the beginning of a distinct political trend in Punjab and also offered some lessons to those who believe in the violent mode to bring about social change.

RETURN OF COMPETITIVE POLITICS

Historically, Punjab has experienced electoral competition between the Akali Dals of different shades and the Congress party.

³ Verma, P.S. (1995), Zila Parishad and Panchayat Samiti Elections in Punjab : Revival of Political activity, *Economic Political Weekly*, 30(22), P. 1325

Table - 4
Punjab Vidhan Sabha elections 1967-1997
(Partywise percentage of votes polled and seats won)

Year of Election	INCs	JP/JD	BJP	CPI	CPM	SAD
1967 Won/contested votes polled (%)	47/103 37.7	--	9/49 9.8	5/20 5.3	3/12 3.2	26/120 24.7
1969 W/C Votes polled (%)	38/103 39.2	--	8/30 9.0	4/28 4.8	2/10 3.1	43/65 29.4
1972 W/C Votes polled (%)	66/90 42.8	--	0/33 5.0	10/13 6.5	1/17 3.3	24/76 28.5
1977 W/C Votes polled (%)	17/96 33.6	25/41 15.0	--	7/18 6.6	8/8 3.5	58/70 31.4
1980 W/C Votes polled (%)	63/117 45.2	--	1/41 6.5	9/18 6.5	5/13 4.1	37/73 26.9
1985 W/C Votes polled (%)	32/117 37.9	--	6/26 5.0	1/37 4.3	0/28 1.9	73/100 38.0
1992 W/C Votes polled (%)	87/116 49.27	1/37 2.22	6/67 16.5	4/20 1.56	1/17 3.97	3/60 2.58
1997 W/C Votes polled (%)	14/105 26.59	--	18/55 8.33	2/15 2.98	0/25 1.79	75/92 37.64

Source:- Election Commission Reports, India, 1967-1997

Competitive politics was seen functioning in the post-terrorism phase only during the **direct elections** to the 40 per cent of the seats of the Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishads in September, 1994, because the Akali Dal had boycotted the 1992 elections.⁴ The same competition was witnessed during the three Assembly by-elections.

In the direct elections to the Panchayats Samities 65.3 per cent and to the Zila Parishad 63.7 per cent votes were polled.

⁴ The direct elections to the 40 per cent of the seats to the Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishads were held in the second phase. Whereas in the first phase on September 27, 1994, only Sarpanches cast their votes to the 60 per cent of the seats.

See Verma, P.S. Op Cit., P. 1321

The Congress was forced to give political space to other political parties. Out of the three Assembly by-elections in mid-1994 two seats were captured by the Akalis and the ruling Congress could retain the lone Nakodar seat.

In the 1996 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress secured 35 per cent of the total valid votes polled and won just two seats. This was its worst performance since the 1977 elections when it could not win any seat and secured merely 33 per cent of the votes (See table 5).

Table - 5
Punjab Lok Sabha elections 1967-1998
(Party wise percentage of votes polled and seats won)

Year of election	INC	JD	BJP	CPI	CPM	SAD
1967 won/contested	9/13	-	1/6 (Jan Sangh)	-	3/9	-
% of votes polled	37.12	-	2.56	4.26	1.88	22.49
1971 won/contested	10/13	-	-	2/3	-	1/11
% of votes polled	45.00	-	4.45	6.22	2.20	30.85
1977 won/contested	0/13	3/3	0/0	1/4	-	9/9
% of votes polled	32.9	12.9	0	6.8	-	43.6
1980 won/contested	12/13	0/9	-	0/2	-	1/7
% of votes polled	52.5	10.0	-	3.8	-	23.4
1985 won/contested	6/12	0/12	0/3	0/6	-	7/11
% of votes polled	23.8	2.2	3.4	6.8	-	37.2
1989 won/contested	2/13	1/4	0/3	0/4	0/3	0/0
% of votes polled	26.5	5.5	4.2	2.1	3.9	-
1992 won/contested	12/13	0/4	0/9	0/1	0/3	1/12
% of votes polled	49.3	1.3	16.5	1.6	4.0	19.4
1996 won/contested	2/13	0/1	0/6	-	-	8/9
% of votes polled	35.0	2.7	6.4	-	-	29.0
1998 won/contested	0/13	1/1	4/4	-	-	8/9
% of votes polled	25.85	4.18	11.67	-	1.06	32.93

Source: Election Commission Reports, India 1967 - 1998

The results of the 1996 Lok Sabha elections were significant because this perhaps was the only normal election after 1980, held without the fear of the gun. In comparison to the 1980 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress Party's performance in the 1996 elections was dismal. In the 1980 elections, the Congress secured 12 seats with 52 per cent votes. However, the 1985, 1989 and 1992 elections were held when peace was still under bargain. In 1985, both the Congress and the Akalis secured almost the same percentage of votes. In this election, the Akalis won seven and the Congress six seats.

These elections were held in the background of the Rajiv-Longowal accord signed in 1984.⁵ The accord was signed to resolve pending issues like apportionment of the river waters, transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab etc.

However, the elections of 1989 and 1992 were held when the agenda for peace was still being bargained. In the 1989 elections, the Akali Dal (M) won a majority of the seats with 39 per cent votes.

The main issue was non-implementation of the Rajiv-Longowal accord by the Congress. The Centre was accused of not fulfilling its promises. The issues of Sikh identity and discrimination against the Sikhs shaped the election campaign.

Interestingly, in the 1996 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress could win in 32 Assembly segments and lost in the remaining 85 Assembly segments.⁶ Further, the Congress could retain its hold only in the periphery of Punjab.

In the 1998 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress could not win even a single seat. The Akali Dal won eight, the Janata Dal one and the BJP four seats. It has been marginalised in the rural Punjab and could maintain its hold only in 55 per cent of the urban and semi-urban Assembly segments. This decline in urban support is attributed to the division of votes between the Congress and the BJP, particularly in Ludhiana, Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur and Ferozpur. The Bharatiya Janata Party polled 7 per cent votes in Jalandhar, 9 per cent in Hoshiarpur, 12 per cent in Ludhiana and 18 per cent in Ferozpur.⁷

⁵ Punjab accord was signed on 24 July, 1985, between the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the then President of the Akali Dal S. Harchand Singh Longowal.

⁶ Election Commission Handbook, 'General Elections, 1997 to the Legislative Assembly to Punjab', New Delhi.

⁷ Election Commission Handbook, op.cit.

The 1997 Assembly elections witnessed the worst ever performance of the Congress which secured 14 seats and 26 per cent votes. The Shiromani Akali Dal won the largest number of seats, i.e. 75, and polled 37 per cent of the votes (Refer to table 4). The Bharatiya Janata Party could win 18 seats and polled 8.33 per cent of the votes. Naturally, this performance has put a question mark on all the traditional theories of electoral alliances and voting behaviour.

(i) Cultural zonewise voting pattern

Traditionally, Punjab is divided into three regions i.e. Doaba (districts of Jalandhar, Kapurthala, Nawanshahr and Hoshiarpur) which is considered to be the stronghold of the Congress and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Majha (districts of Amritsar and Gurdaspur) a competing base of the Congress and the Akalis and Malwa (the remaining districts) considered to be an Akali stronghold. The election results defied this division. The Congress was routed in Majha from where it could not win even a single seat as compared to 10 seats in the 1985 elections. Similarly, the Congress could win only five seats in Doaba as compared to 10 in the 1985 elections (Refer to table 6)

Table - 6
Seats won by Akalis and Congress
(Regionwise In 1997 and 1985)

Year		Doaba	Majha	Malwa
1997	Congress	5	0	9
	Akali	13	18	44
1985	Congress	10	10	12
	Akali	11	14	48

Source : Election Commission Reports, India – 1985, 1997

Similarly, the Akalis lost four seats in their traditional stronghold, Malwa, as compared to the 1985 elections. In 1995 Assembly elections, the Akalis won 44 seats in Malwa and in 1997 elections they won 48 seats in this region.

The results of elections show that the Congress could not improve its support base during its rule i.e. between 1992 and 1996. Interestingly, in these elections, the voters were committed to restoring the representative and competitive character of democracy.

(ii) Religion-based vote banks

Further, this alliance defied the religious vote bank theory that the Hindus vote for the Congress or the BJP and the Sikhs for the Akalis. A sample survey on the eve of the 1997 assembly elections showed that among the people who preferred to vote for the Akali Dal were 38 per cent Sikhs, 27 per cent Hindus, 12 per cent Hindu S.Cs. and 23 per cent Sikh S.Cs. Similarly, among those who preferred to vote for the BJP were 45 per cent Hindus, 34 per cent Sikhs, 11 per cent Sikh S.Cs. and 10 per cent Hindu S.Cs.

Table - 7

Party preference by Scheduled Castes and religious communities

	Sikhs	(Sikh (S.C.))	Hindu	Hindu (S.C.)
Akali (B)	38%	23%	27%	12%
BJP	34%	11%	45%	10%

Source : IDC Election Survey 1997.

This clearly shows that the Akali Dal-BJP combine was voted by all these sections of society irrespective of their religion, caste or creed. Whereas the Congress was voted by a smaller number of Sikh voters. On the other hand, the BSP could get only the support of Hindu S.Cs. and Sikh S.Cs.

(iii) Post-election coalition to pre-election alliances

Another important factor in these elections was the electoral alliances formed by the political parties. Punjab has a history of mergers, post-election coalitions and electoral alliances of political parties. It is only recently that Punjab has formed pre-election electoral alliances, occasional seat adjustments notwithstanding. This process can be understood in three distinct contexts. The first context was the merger of the Akali Dal with the Congress in 1948 and in 1956.

(a) Politics of merger

In the first phase from 1947 to the mid-sixties one-party dominance negated the existence of regional interests and branded these assertions as anti-national. The aura of national freedom movement and its fall-out being the Congress Party, hegemonised the whole spectrum of Indian politics.

The politics of accommodation of regional interests was the main guiding principle of the Congress Party. It is within this framework that the Akalis were encouraged to merge with the Congress for the first time in 1948 and the second time in 1956. A convention of the members of the Akali Dal Working Committee, elected legislators and Shri Gurudwara Prabandhac Committee jathedars was convened to restructure the activities of the Akali Dal. The convention was held in the background of the recommendations of the State Re-organization Commission for the merger of Punjab, PEPSU and Himachal Pradesh. The new state was to be divided into the so-called Punjabi-speaking and Hindi-speaking regions and two regional committees consisting of the members of the legislature belonging to the respective regions were to be constituted.⁸

⁸ The Government of India in December 1953 appointed the State Re-organisation Commission. In 1954 the Akalis launched a vigorous agitation for the Punjabi Suba demand. For example, processions were taken out, by Akalis at

The convention resolved to amend the constitution of the Akali Dal to confine their activities to religious, educational and economic welfare of the Sikhs.

To quote :

- (i) the Akali Dal would not have any separate political programme of its own;
- (ii) the Dal would concentrate on the protection and promotion of religious, educational, cultural and economic interests of the Panth and would guard against any violation and infringement of fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution that adversely hit the Sikhs.
- (iii) the Dal would actively participate in the formula and in the implementation of various plans for the development of the country.⁹

The Congress Party gave representation to the erstwhile Akali leaders in the Provincial Election Board. These leaders were S. Hukam Singh, Giani Kartar Singh and S. Ajit Singh Sarhadi. The former Akalis in the Congress were functioning as Akalis within the Congress Party. They were expecting 40 seats in the provincial elections, whereas were given 22 seats. The main negotiating plank of the former Akalis was that in 1955 SGPC elections the Akali Dal had polled 75 per cent of the Sikh votes and secured 112 seats. Therefore, erstwhile members of the Akali Dal should be allocated 75 per cent of the seats for the provincial assembly elections¹⁰. The communal arithmetic formed the basis of the Akali Dal's merger into the Congress.

Ludhiana (on the eve of Guru Gobind Singh's birthday) and at Amritsar (the Hola Mohalla procession) on December, 1954, and March, 1955, respectively. The continued and persistent agitations and protests worsened the situation. The morchas launched acquired communal colouring.

⁹ Ajit Singh Sarhadi (1970), *Punjabi Suba : Story of the Struggle*, Delhi : U.C. Kapur, P. 284,

The resolution was unanimously passed on September 20, 1956

¹⁰ Ajit Singh Sarhadi, *op.cit.* p. 292-326

The politics of accommodation was the main guiding principle, negating regional interests. Subsequent events proved that these interests were real and could not be subsumed by the co-option of a few individual leaders.

This experiment did not succeed. The 'melting pot hypothesis' could not bring about ideological homogeneity. It became evident from the articulations of regional aspirations and communal demands within the Congress by Akali stalwarts who had joined the Congress. For instance, Pandit Mohan Lal, a senior Congressman, opines that Sardar Swaran Singh, a former Akali leader, had been successfully securing the support of some prominent Akalis in Parliamentary elections even as a Congress candidate.¹¹ These former Akali leaders even claimed to have articulated the rights of Sikh Harijans, secured postponement for three years the nationalisation of the transport business owned overwhelming by the 'Sikh community'.

In fact Akali leaders in the Congress functioned as an exclusive group. The ideological influence of former Akalis was so powerful that it influenced the politics of the Congress. Even a secular leader like Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon flirted with the SGPC elections. He managed to defeat Master Tara Singh of the Akali Dal in the SGPC elections on November 16, 1958.

The Congress in order to subsume the emerging regional aspirations provided legitimacy to the divisive articulation of interests. These accommodations helped the Congress to increase its electoral strength. In the 1962 elections, the Congress won 51

¹¹ Mohan Lal (1984), Disintegration of Punjab, Chandigarh : Sammer Prakashan, p. 318

seats with 45.8 per cent of the total votes in the Panjabi-speaking region and 39 seats with 40.9 per cent votes in the Hindi-speaking region.¹²

The erosion of the Akali support base led to renewed attempts to mobilise people around exclusive demands. The demand for a Panjabi Suba was raised. The Akali Dal made excessive use of religious symbols, idiom and appeal to articulate its political demands.

It was during this phase that the Akali Dal split into two groups. These groups were led by Master Tara Singh and Sant Fateh Singh. In January, 1965, the group led by Sant Fateh Singh won 95 of the 138 seats in the SGPC elections, giving a crushing defeat to the group led by Master Tara Singh. The split in the Akali Dal initiated a new phase in Punjab politics. It coincided with the re-organisation of the state on a linguistic basis and the green revolution in agriculture. The Reorganisation Act was passed in September, 1966. This phase marked the beginning of coalition of political parties with anti-congressism as a major thrust.

(b) Post-Election coalitions

The second context was post-election coalitions. These coalition governments were formed with the sole purpose of thwarting the dominance of the Congress. Historically, the Akalis formed three coalition governments with the support of other opposition parties. Its main coalition partner was the Bharatiya Jan Sangh.

The first coalition was formed after the fourth general election in 1967. In this election the Congress won 47 seats in the 104-member State Legislative Assembly. The Akali Dal (Sant Fateh Singh) secured 24 seats, the Jan Sangh 9, the Communist Party of

¹² Pramod Kumar; Sharma, Manmohan; Sood, Atul and Handa, Ashwani (1984), 'Punjab Crisis : Context and Trends', Chandigarh : CRRID, p. 46.

India 5, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) 3, the Republican Party 3, the Akali Dal (Master Tara Singh) 2 (Refer to table 4). A united front of all parties was formed with S. Gurnam Singh as their leader. It was a combination of divergent ideological groups with the sole purpose of keeping the Congress out.

A common programme was evolved, at Khanna, and the resolution adopted read:

*Whereas we stand for amity and goodwill among all sections of Punjabis irrespective of caste or creed, and promise to take steps to strengthen the new state of Punjab economically and politically, we resolve to oppose all separatist trends and moves aimed at weakening the unity and integrity of the country.*¹³

Notwithstanding the common programme, the hawks both these political parties started articulating their respective communal agenda. The communalist Hindus in Punjab strongly criticised the Jan Sangh leadership for betraying the cause of Hindi. This forced its leadership to demand that Hindi should be given the same status as before the reorganisation of the State. A Cabinet sub-committee which was appointed left the matter to Sant Fateh Singh and Mr. Yagya Dutt Sharma to evolve a compromise formula on the status to be accorded to Punjabi and Hindi. However, no decision was reached since the Ministry fell due to the defection of Mr. Lachman Singh Gill.

Table -8
Seats won and percentage of votes polled in coalition election
(1967,1969 and 1977)

Year of Election	INC	JP/JD	BJP	CPI	CPM	SAD
1967 Won/contested votes polled (%)	47/103 37.7	--	9/49 9.8	5/20 5.3	3/12 3.2	26/120 24.7
1969 W/C Votes polled (%)	38/103 39.2	--	8/30 9.0	4/28 4.8	2/10 3.1	43/65 29.4
1977 W/C Votes polled	17/96 33.6	25/41 15.0	--	7/18 6.6	8/8 3.5	58/70 31.4

¹³ Sangh-Akali Bid to Form Govt. : Complete Accord Reached, The Tribune, Ambala 2 March, 1967.

(%)						
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Source:- Reports of Election Commission, India 1967, 1969, 1977

The second coalition was formed after the mid-term elections of February, 1969, in which the Akali Dal won 43 seats and the Jan Sangh 8. The coalition government was headed by S. Gurnam Singh. Differences among the coalition partners arose over issues like language, Centre-State relations and the status of Chandigarh.

The third coalition came into being after the removal of S.Gurnam Singh as the Chief Minister of Punjab. S. Prakash Singh Badal was sworn in as Chief Minister on March 27, 1970, with a new agenda of the coalition government. The Jan Sangh withdrew from the coalition in June, 1970, on the question of the jurisdiction of Guru Nanak Dev University. However, the main differences were on issues relating to the transfer of certain Panjabi speaking areas to Punjab.¹⁴

These post-election coalitions were in continuation of the politics of accommodation pursued by the Congress in the pre-reorganisation phase. The co-option of leaders representing divergent ideological persuasions and regional interests in the so-called national mainstream sharpened the conflicts. In other words, these coalitions were formed with the sole aim of capturing power. These were marriages of convenience for the leadership, whereas their ranks held each other with deep suspicion.

(c) Pre-election electoral alliance

¹⁴ During this phase of the post-reorganisation period the Akali leadership kept on fighting for the following three demands:

- i) Abolition of common links. The reorganisation Act had provided 42 common links between Punjab and Haryana. Some of the common links were, for example, the Control Board, pending division of assets, PEPSU road transport, etc.;
- ii) return of Chandigarh and the Dam project controlled by the Central Government;
- iii) inclusion of certain Punjabi-speaking areas (allegedly excluded from Punjab).

The Prime Minister award Chandigarh to Punjab, and Fazilka and Abohar and 114 villages to Haryana. The decision still remains unimplemented.

The third context is electoral alliances between competing political parties. The undercurrent of these alliances was the lessons and issues relating to the decade of terrorism. In the 1996 Lok Sabha elections, the Akali Dal entered into an alliance with the Bahujan Samaj Party and seat adjustment with the Bharatiya Janata Party.¹⁵

The new electoral arithmetic had many hidden potentials and inherent contradictions. The alliance had adversely affected the Congress Party's performance and resulted in a decline in the support for the Congress among the Scheduled Castes who constitute 28.5 per cent of the total population of Punjab, perhaps the highest in India.

The impact of the alliances is easily discernible in the Doaba region consisting of Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar and Phillaur constituencies. Doaba has been the traditional stronghold of the Congress. The Congress maintained its dominance in this region since 1967 except in the 1977 and 1989 elections. In both these elections, the Congress was defeated by a multi-party alliance. For example, the BSP won the Hoshiarpur seat after two successive defeats. It secured 19.7 per cent and 26.5 per cent of the votes in the 1989 and 1992 elections respectively. It secured 39.5 per cent of the votes in the 1996 elections. Mr. Kanshi Ram, the BSP supremo, could win the seat only because of the active support of the Akali Dal (B). In Hoshiarpur, according to an estimate, the Jat Sikhs and the Scheduled Castes together constituted around 44 per cent of the votes polled. Mr. Kanshi Ram polled around 40 per cent of the valid votes (Refer to table 9). Assuming that all Scheduled Castes votes polled went to the BSP, Mr. Kanshi Ram still needed around 14 per cent additional votes. In this case it can be safely presumed that the Akali Dal (B) support provided the winning margin.

¹⁵ Pramod Kumar, 'Congress hopes belied', Frontline, 14 June, 1996.

There was seat adjustment for four parliamentary constituencies and in Ludhiana constituency the BJP fought on its own.

Table 9
Estimated votes polled according to caste
(1996 Lok Sabha)

Sikh Votes	Sikh Votes polled (% of total votes)	SC Votes	SC Votes polled (% of total Votes)	Total Sikh + SC. Votes polled(% of total)	Polling %	Winning candidate's votes %	% winning margin	Constituency
20.5	29.5	28.8	28.8	58.35	65.86	35.24	11.06	Gurdaspur
27.8	27.12	24.9	24.34	51.46	58.7	41.03	5.35	Amritsar
23.1	22.37	34.7	33.61	55.97	58.57	44.98	3.02	Jalandhar
19.8	19.48	24.9	25.02	44.51	57.57	39.50	1.88	Hoshiarpur
46.7	46.78	31.4	34.4	81.2	63.99	43.20	5.4	Tarn Taran
34.8	34.59	30.5	30.17	64.8	59.71	48.02	8.1	Phillaur
37.3	36.70	21.8	21.44	58.2	58.9	48.5	10.51	Ropar
31.05	29.93	22.3	21.43	51.4	58.9	46.46	7.2	Patiala
44.4	43.89	27.7	27.39	71.27	72.01	39.04	4.84	Faridkot
41.9	41.76	24.8	24.61	66.37	61.3	44.72	13.64	Bathinda
40.2	40.56	25.1	25.29	65.85	71.72	32.07	10.82	Sangrur
36.5	36.34	18.9	18.78	55.2	60.2	45.60	13.1	Ludhiana
28.2	28.20	11.9	18.04	46.24	64.02	36.83	8.34	Ferozpur

Note: 1. Data on caste estimates have been collected from a leading political party, therefore, it can only provide broad indications.

2. Percentage of votes polled by castes have been calculated as a representative percentage of population from total votes polled

Similarly, the Akali Dal(B) candidate could win the Jalandhar seat due to the swing in the Scheduled Caste votes in favour of the Akali Dal. The Jalandhar seat has been won by the Congress since 1967 except in 1977 and 1989. In these two elections multi-party alliance gave the winning edge to non-Congress parties. In 1989 Sh. Inder Kumar Gujral of the Janata Dal won this seat with the active support of the Akalis. According to a rough estimate the Jat Sikh and Scheduled Caste votes constituted around 56 per cent of the votes polled. Jat Sikh votes were approximately 22 per cent. Assuming that all these votes were polled in favour of the Akali Dal which secured 45 per cent of the total votes polled, it could not have won without the support of the Scheduled Castes and non-Jat Sikhs. Similar is the case the Phillaur constituency.

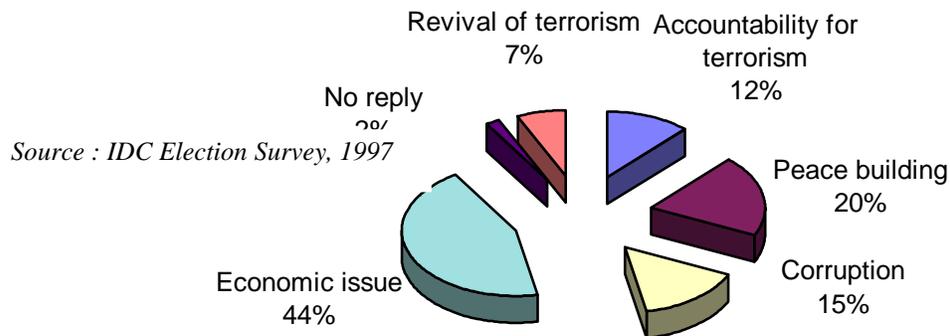
Similarly in the Malwa region the alliance worked to the advantage of the Akalis, particularly in Ropar, Patiala, Faridkot, Bathinda, Sangrur and Ludhiana. In Sangrur, for instance, Mr. Surjit Singh Barnala, a former Chief Minister of Punjab, was being opposed by Mr. Simranjit Singh Mann who is known for his radical views. In this constituency Jat Sikhs' votes polled were around 40 per cent. These were divided between Mr. Barnala and Mr. Mann. The winning margin of Mr. Barnala was around 11 per cent (Refer to table 9). This was mainly contributed by the S.C. votes.

However, in the 1997 Assembly elections, the Akali Dal entered into an alliance with the BJP. The main reasons for the alliance were the emergence of the BJP as a major national party, and the electorate's concern for Panjabi unity rather than pursuing a divisive separatist agenda. This alliance was political and not merely electoral, because the Akali Dal needed a political space at the national level to shed its anti-national image and the BJP needed to counter the Congress and the Left propaganda that its politics is anti-minorities.

Further, it was argued that this alliance shall promote and cement unity between two religious groups and help to reconstruct fractured society of Punjab. A section of the media termed this alliance as based on the communal framework and therefore, it had the potential to create tensions. They expressed the fear that it might not last long like the three coalition governments formed in the mid-sixties. In response to this it was argued that the earlier alliances were post-elections coalitions. This was pre-election unity which had obtained the mandate of the people and adopted the agenda set by the people. Therefore it might not be easy for the parties to return to their own agenda. For example, a majority of the voters in 1997 elections did not mention issues like state

autonomy or the Anandpur Sahib resolution. In their agenda peace ranked high, accompanied by concerns such as unemployment, price rise and better returns for the crops.¹⁶

Chart-3
People's agenda for elections



To sum up, it is interesting to note that the main plank of politics of merger, post or pre-election coalitions has been to promote Punjabi unity. In 1967 post-election coalition the common programme adopted at Khanna reinforcing the need for Panjabi unity formed the basis of the coalition. But the redefining of the agenda in 1997 and 1998 elections was not the result of any electoral alliance. It has been shaped by the people and is the outcome of the lessons learnt from the ten years of reign of terror in Punjab. Therefore, it has greater chances of lasting longer.

PEOPLE'S AGENDA : RESURGE OF DEMOCRACY

Political parties having lost control over the events in the wake of terrorism, could not impose their ideological and political programme in the post-1992 phase.. Earlier, political postures taken by the Akali Dal had been instrumental, to a large extent, in

¹⁶ Institute for Development and Communication, 'Tilt towards Akali Dal (B) - BJP Alliance', The Hindustan Times,

giving direction to Punjab's politics. Even the Akali Dal had to shift its agenda from politico-religious identity¹⁷ to non-communal formations. The Shiromani Akali Dal President, Mr. Prakash Singh Badal, brought the notion of Punjabi unity to the centre stage of Punjab politics mainly to draw legitimacy for its slogan of ensuring lasting peace in the state.

*Peace in Punjab is very dear to us. We will make all endeavours to ensure peace and harmony that will last. The unity of all Punjabis could be the only true and dependable basis of lasting peace and there could be no social and political stability without Panjabi unity.*¹⁸

This gave the Akali Dal an added advantage over the Congress which is seen as anti-Sikh due to its role in November, 1984, riots, Operation Blue Star etc. It is in this background that the Akali Dal structured its campaign with major thrust on anti-Congressism. In a statement the Akali Dal President, Mr. Badal, said; 'All Punjabis to join hands in the massive task of social restructuring and economic rebuilding by making sure that anti-people and anti-Punjab Congress regime is routed from the state, lock stock and barrel.'¹⁹

The main plank of the Akali Dal was that the unity of all Punjabis could be the only true and dependable basis of lasting peace and there could be no social and political stability without Punjabi unity. This seems to have been prompted by the fact that during the phase of terrorism, legitimate demands like state autonomy, a greater share

New Delhi 1 February, 1997

¹⁷ Excerpts from Anandpur Sahib Resolution, 23 October, 1983 adopted by Shiromani Akali Dal. In this resolution, the main aims of Akali Dal have been propagation of religion and Sikh tenets and condemnation of atheism and maintaining the realisation of Panth's independent entity and creation of such an environment where Sikh sentiment can find its full expression.

See for details, Pramod Kumar et.al (1984) op.cit. p. 128

¹⁸ Statement issued by S. Prakash Singh Badal at Meet the Press, Chandigarh Press Club, November, 1996,

¹⁹ Ibid, November, 1996.

in river waters and the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab had degenerated into the movement for “Khalistan” which played havoc with the people’s lives.

Further, in all the previous elections, the main stance of the Akali Dal had been anti-Centre and it was in this context that their demand for greater state autonomy was understood. The anti-Centre stance of the Shiromani Akali Dal remained dominant till 1997. At an emergency meeting of the Working Committee of the Shiromani Akali Dal held in February, 1993, under the chairmanship of S. Prakash Singh Badal deep resentment was expressed at the Centre’s ‘continuing policy of betrayal, treachery, discrimination and tyranny against Panjabis in general and Sikhs in particular, a policy which has been in force for the past 45 years.’²⁰ However, in the post-1997 elections the Akali campaign did not revolve around anti-Centrism. The Akali Dal manifesto for the 1997 Lok Sabha elections put emphasis on co-operative federalism rather than on anti-Centrism.

*The Akali-BJP government has opened a new chapter in Centre-State relations, ushering in the age of co-operative federalism in the country. The era of confrontations has been effectively ended and replaced with a forward-looking thrust on working together for the over-all good of the state and the nation.*²¹

Political changes in the national political scene have brought about a change of perception among the average Sikh. For instance, in rural Punjab especially, the Congress, no longer symbolised the Central power. Therefore, if the Akalis addressed their supporters towing an anti-Congress line, they were not considered as ‘anti-Centre’ and thus anti-national. But in these elections the Akali campaign did not revolve around anti-Centrism. Rather, it emphasised greater autonomy for the state.²²

²⁰ Resolution of the Akali Dal Working Committee meeting held on 19 February, 1993.

²¹ Akali Dal Election Manifesto, 1998.

²² Moga Resolution of the Akali Dal, 22 February, 1996.

As for the Congress (I), there is only a marginal change in its priorities in the state. The attitude stems from its perception that even after the assassination of Chief Minister Beant Singh, “peace with prosperity” continues to be the main guiding principle of the people’s political preference in Punjab. The marginal shift in the Congress agenda in the post-Beant Singh phase has been from an emphasis on liberal market reforms to economic subsidies for most sections of society. The economic concessions offered by the Congress Government on the eve of the elections include concessions for the peasantry, urban traders, landless labour, Dalits and people in the services and various other occupations, apart from the poor.

Similarly the main emphasis of the Akali-BJP combine was also on subsidies. Interestingly, all the dominant political parties i.e. the Congress, the BJP, the Akalis have approved market reforms in principle, but made electoral promises against these reforms.²³ In these elections votes were sought for subsidies and people have voted for those. Subsidies have been used as a poverty-alleviating and vote-catching device. The politics of populism became more pronounced with the introduction of economic reforms. The political parties in order to outcompete with each other promised doles. The Akali-BJP alliance gave doles immediately after capturing power in the state in 1997. It did not take notice of the fact that in the state economic growth rates were falling and in 1986 it had fallen below the national average. According to a report of a committee of officers,

²³ See for details;

* Congress Government People oriented Action Plan, 22 December, 1996.

* Common Minimum Programme of the Akali Dal – Bhartiya Janata Party alliance, 1997.

the revenue deficit has reached 2.7 per cent of GSDP in 1996-97. The revenue expenditure has increased from 12.23 per cent in 1985-86 to 16.76 per cent in 1996-97. As a consequence of this, the committee reports, development process will gradually come to a halt and government shall be able to pay only for its own continuance.

It has also highlighted that the explicit subsidies have doubled from Rs. 52.03 crores in 1994-95 to Rs. 106.13 crores in 1996-97. The total amount of implicit subsidies was estimated to be Rs. 2702.86 crores²⁴.

The dismal financial situation could not deter the alliance from announcing free electricity to the agricultural sector and doles for other segments of the population. The politics of populism and a shift in the political agenda remained the main dominant features till 1998.

Akali Dal factionalism and extremism

This agenda got a set-back in early 1999 when factional fight between the Shiromani Akali Dal President, S. Prakash Singh Badal and Shri Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) president S. Gurcharan Singh Tohra, surfaced.

History has witnessed that the intra-party factionalism within the Akali Dal has a potential to degenerate and vitiate inter-community relations. This is a negation of the process of reconciliation initiated by the resurgence of democratic politics in Punjab in the post-1992 phase. Moderate politics is supine and placates the fundamentalists as was done in the eighties by Giani Zail Singh, a former Congress Chief Minister of Punjab.

The ideological position of the Akali Dal has its basis in a monolith Sikh identity. The interaction of this ideological position with the specific nature of socio-cultural and economic development leads to a diverse kind of political activity within the Akali politics.

These diverse political activities within the Akali Dal can be understood vis-à-vis the competing ideological positions represented by S. Prakash Singh Badal, the Chief Minister of Punjab, and S. Gurcharan Singh Tohra, the SGPC President. The political space occupied by S. Prakash Singh Badal, a moderate political leader, is mainly in the domain of politics of development, followed by the Panjabi identity and the least in the sphere of religious politics. On the contrary, Mr. Gurcharan Singh Tohra draws political strength mainly from religious issues. He is not seen as a symbol of socio-economic development within the framework of moderate politics.

In other words, the moderate political position falls in a broad spectrum of subsidies for the farmers, unemployment and Panjabi identity, whereas, the Tohra faction functions within the religious minority frame (like protection of the rights of the minorities within India, issues like rights of the Sikh minority settled in Udham Singh Nagar in Uttar Pradesh, People's Commission on human rights, Sikh Civil Code, religious codes of conduct, banning of left-oriented cultural activities etc.) The power equation between the two factions gets disturbed if one tries to violate the other's space. For instance, appropriation of religious space by the Badal faction disturbs the equilibrium and sharpen the factional fight between these groups.²⁵ This, in turn, pushes the Tohra faction to build bridges with extreme fundamentalism.

These competing positions operate to maximise their space, which can be termed as 'bridge politics', in which each faction tries to build bridges with political tendencies other than the competing faction. Mr. Prakash Singh Badal launched himself in the religious domain on January 7, at Anandpur Sahib with a desire to decimate the SGPC

²⁴ A Strategy of Fiscal Management for Punjab, issued by Department of Finance, Government of Punjab, November, 1988.

President, Mr. Gurcharan Singh Tohra.²⁶ This brought him in direct conflict with Mr. Tohra and the Akal Takht Chief, Bhai Ranjit Singh. On the other hand, Mr. Tohra has been raising issues relating to governance, transfer of Udham Singh Nagar, People's Commission probing Human Rights violation, formulation of separate civil code for the Sikhs. Both these factions in order to checkmate each other are increasingly operating in the religious domain. Having infiltrated the space of religious leaders, Mr. Badal started politics of confrontation with individuals rather than fundamentalism. This trend got impetus by the 'Bridge politics' followed by the Apex Akali leadership. Instead of co-opting each other, the major factions started building bridges with the fringe elements bringing religion-based politics to the centre stage.

The trend started with Mr. Tohra bestowing siropas on April 13, 1997, (Baisakhi day) on the relatives of slain militants such as the younger son of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale, family members of the assassins of Indira Gandhi and General A.S. Vaidya was the beginning of the "bridge politics" where the mainstay of factionalism within moderate politics was to reinforce religious fundamentalism. Similarly, the former Punjab Technical Education Minister, Manjit Singh Calcutta, (Tohra faction) suggested that Kirtan classes and religious prayers should be held in schools.²⁷ The Akal Takht Jathedar, Bhai Ranjit Singh, issued a series of codes of conduct. He ordered all gurdwaras to maintain Sangat te Pangat di Maryada by sitting on the floor while partaking of the langar. He banned installation of the Granth Sahib in hotels and marriage halls for the purpose of Anand Karaj (wedding), selling or burning of spare

²⁵ Jagtar Singh, 'My Party and Government is Panthic', The Indian Express, Chandigarh 27 February, 1999

²⁶ Pandher, Sarabjit, 'Badal Makes Tactical Truce with Tohra', The Hindu, Delhi 8 January, 1999.

²⁷ 'Club Religion with Education : Calcutta', The Indian Express, Chandigarh 28 November, 1997.

gutkas (holy scriptures) as waste paper.²⁸ Further the AISSF, the sword arm of the militant leader, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale, at a congregation resolved to start 'Singh Sajo Lehar' (baptism)²⁹. At Anandpur Sahib on Jan. 7, Mr. Badal hijacked the religious agenda and chalked out a programme of baptising and Puritanism reinforced religion-oriented ideology of Mr. Tohra Mr. Badal also presided over the ninth anniversary of Bhai Harminder Singh Sandhu, a former general secretary of Sikh Students Federation and a close associate of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale. Similar trend was noticed in the early eighties when the 'Amrit Parchar Lehar' (baptism movement through partaking amrit) to create a religious reservoir was misappropriated into politics. This provided the basis for launching a separatist movement.

The Akali Dal factionalism can conceivably lead to competitive religiosity with greater emphasis on Sikh issues which are communally divisive and therefore, have a potential to revive communal and separatist politics and enable militancy to return.

However, democratic politics thus far has been successful in keeping these issues to the background. But the political parties are increasingly acquiring more space and thereby imposing their own agenda. For instance, the Akali Dal's return to the panthic theme may lead to the subversion of the agenda of Panjabi unity. The developments of the last two decades have clearly shown that the politics of divisiveness has its basis in the struggle for power among the factions and/or individual leaders. It has also shown that the 'threat and need paradox' of democracy continued to guide the political activities in the state. In other words, choices are exercised in response to the threat posed to the power that be by the competing groups within legislative politics.

²⁸ Kang, Bhavdeep, Embers of an old Fire, Outlook, 8 June, 1998.

²⁹ AISSF, 'Lead, then dictate', The Indian Express, Chandigarh 29 November, 1998

As a result, bridges are made with those fringe groups which are a threat to the system, but can help checkmate the competing faction within legislative politics. This happened in the eighties also when Sant Jarnail Singh, a radical Sikh leader, was patronised to control the increasing influence of the Akali Dal moderates on the legislative politics of the state. It appears the process has started all over again.

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