

GUEST COLUMN

BY PRAMOD KUMAR

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... development, ideally. And, that should have been the focus in Punjab this time. Instead, it was all about doles, deras and drugs



PUNJAB URGENTLY needs a paradigm shift in the development path. Unfortunately, the recently concluded assembly elections had everything else except a serious debate on solutions to challenges like stagnation in agriculture, creating avenues for youth, linking agriculture with industry, reclaiming the capital city as an investment pole and evolving models for providing citizens access to ease of living. It became a battle royale of false claims and empty promises to entice voters. Political parties became *dharamshalas* without doors, with popular politicians hopping from one party to another.

Elections have been reduced to a ritual of democracy and just a matter of perceptions and popularity ratings of leaders alone, and not of political parties. And, the only slogan audible has been 'change', which has come to mean giving freebies and doles and selective targeting of political adversaries as a substitute for competitive politics. The overall approach has been to use a cocktail of doles and promises to cater to everyone's taste. So, we had 'menu-festo' rather than manifesto. There is a menu card for farmers, traders, students, dalits, industrialists and women. The credit for this invention goes to the AAP. It was strange that the agenda of

politics could not mirror the issues raised by the year-long farmers' protests.

The apathy of voters with the existing system became visible— as the votes polled were 5 per cent less than that in the 2017 assembly elections. In 76 of 117 constituencies, the decline in the votes polled was between 5 to 12 per cent.

This election was different, as it moved from two-party to multi-party contests. New electoral alliances were formed, and blatant attempts were made to polarise the electoral space on the basis of religion and caste. To counter this, the deras were invoked to weaken the exclu-

sive vote bank politics. The grammar of electoral discourse was dominated by doles, deras and drugs, garnished with identity politics, ranging from endorsing of the dalit identity, radical Sikh assertions, activating insecurity among the Hindu minority and revival of Jat peasantry hegemonic politics.

The AAP had an advantage as it did not have any historical baggage and did not locate itself in any fault lines of caste, religion or region. It largely followed a 'catch all' approach. And the activation of various fault lines could not act as impediments to the AAP. The Shiromani Akali Dal, meanwhile, had a baggage of the sacrilege cases. And the Congress was facing huge anti-incumbency. Added to this was the self destructive struggle between the warring Congress leaders like Navjot Singh Sidhu, Channi, Sunil Jakhar and Pratap Bajwa.

In Punjab, there are no exclusive vote banks based on religion or caste, unlike in many other states. There are no neat categories of minority (Hindu) and majority (Sikhs). For instance, the Hindus struggled with majority-minority complex, perceiving themselves to be a majority in India and a minority in the reorganised Punjab, and vice-versa with the Sikhs.

The duality of minority persecu-



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tion complex and majority arrogance complex shapes both the contestation between the Sikh-dominated Akali Dal and the Hindu-dominated BJP as well as the electoral compulsions for coalition strategies to capture political and economic power. The Akali Dal and the BJP formed four post-poll coalitions before 1992 and four pre-poll alliances since 1997. The ideological explanation given by the SAD and the BJP was that to protect and promote their exclusive support bases, the coalition was essential.

There has been a change in the political strategy of the BJP—it is branching out by regionalising its own agenda, leadership and symbols, and has carved out an alliance with Capt Amarinder Singh's Punjab Lok Congress. This has also exposed the BJP's electoral strategy of attempting to marginalise regional parties.

In this election, the SAD has not entered into a pre-poll alliance with the BJP over the farm bills issue. It has instead allied with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)—an alliance that has come about after two and a half decades.

Not surprisingly, this coalition of the opposites existed within the Congress, too, which claimed to be secular. The Congress represented a coalition of Sikh leaders (who were votaries of Punjabi Suba—political movement demanding the creation of a Punjabi-speaking state) with Hindu leaders (who were in the forefront of the Hindi agitation and in favour of Maha Punjab).

It all started with the manner in which the Congress leadership replaced Capt Amarinder Singh just a few months before the election. When the name of Jakhar (a Hindu) was doing the rounds, the Congress spokesperson made a statement that only a Sikh could be the chief minister—a remark that did not go down well with the Jat Sikhs and the



NEW BEGINNING
AAP supporters celebrate the party's victory in Punjab

Hindus. The nomination of a Scheduled Caste chief minister for the first time created a buzz. But has it led to a consolidation of SC votes to a particular leader or party? Perhaps no.

The religious reforms movements, particularly Sikhism and to an extent Arya Samaj, weakened the behavioural aspects of inter- and intra-caste practices of the Sikhs and Hindus. The Scheduled Castes acquired more social and political bargaining space. They found representation across political parties rather than merely in a caste-based political party, such as the BSP.

The Scheduled Castes do not constitute a captive vote bank of any political party. Numerically though, they are proportionately represented in the state politics. Of the 1,365 legislators between 1967 and 2017, the Scheduled Castes constituted 25.57 per cent, OBCs 8.57 per cent and Jat Sikhs 43.59 per cent.

The religio-caste divisions, Dera factor, regional variations (between Majha, Malwa and Doaba) and consolidation of Urban Hindus could not counter the AAP wave. The decimation of the SAD and marginalisation of the Congress in elections by the AAP is historic. It is a signal

that the AAP is all poised to replace the Congress and out-compete the BJP particularly in Himachal Pradesh and Haryana.

In Punjab, as is evident, the status quo has become unsustainable. Therefore, it is urgent that the political leadership ought to think afresh and demonstrate its sincerity and will to implement the pro-people agenda. But perspectives on development in Punjab have hinged merely on government debt. Undoubtedly, it is worrisome. There are states which are under heavy debt, but are maintaining their pace of development. The crisis in Punjab is not merely confined to the grim fact that the state debt is mounting or that unemployment is rising, or that dalits are reduced to penury, or that drug addiction, female foeticide and farmer suicides are on the rise, the real crisis is the manner in which these problems ought to have been effectively addressed.

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MT LOTUS

Despite the loss of Chief Minister Dhama, the BJP banks on developmental work to retain power in Uttarakhand

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR

On March 8, a day after exit poll trends were out, Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhama and his wife, Geeta, visited the local deity Mahasu Devta at Hanol, in Dehradun district. Dhama prayed for happiness and good luck, and performed the traditional Harul Tandi dance with folk instruments, following tribal customs.

Dhama's prayers were answered when results came out on March 10. Although exit polls pointed towards a hung assembly, voters of Uttarakhand reposed their faith in the BJP. According to latest reports, the party has won 38 seats and was leading in another nine seats in the 70-member house. As the BJP and the Congress were worried about a hung assembly, senior leaders of both parties were camping in the hill state to "manage" the situation.

The BJP was all the more concerned because Uttarakhand has always elected a new government in every poll. But, it appears that the Modi magic has worked this time. In an earlier interview with THE WEEK, Dhama said ever since Modi became prime minister, all patterns had been broken.

Dhama, who took over as chief minister last July, managed to turn the tide in the BJP's favour, but he lost from Khatima constituency in Udham Singh Nagar district. The seat has a considerable number of Sikh voters, who were upset with



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the Union government's farm laws. Congress candidate Bhuwan Chandra Kapri defeated Dhama by over 6,000 votes. The BJP will now have to decide whether to nominate a chief minister from among the MLAs or to pick someone else.

Dhama's loss, meanwhile, confirms another pattern of Uttarakhand that none of the incumbent chief ministers has ever been re-elected. In the past 20 years, the state has seen 11 chief ministers and only N.D. Tiwari of the Congress was able to complete a full term. Interestingly, chief ministerial candidates of the other two major parties—Harish Rawat of the Congress and Ajay Kothiyal of the Aam Aadmi Party—too, lost.

Rawat, the face of the Congress in Uttarakhand, used to speak about this election as the last opportunity to protect Uttarakhandiyat (the spirit of Uttarakhand). The migration of

↑ SWEET VICTORY

BJP leaders Pralhad Joshi, Pushkar Singh Dhama and Kailash Vijayvargiya celebrate the party's win in Uttarakhand

people from the hills in search of jobs was one of the main issues in the state.

The BJP had swept the 2017 polls winning 57 seats, but changed the chief minister thrice in the past one year. The Char Dham Devasthanam Management Act controversy, which angered priests as it allowed the government to take control of major temples, was one of the reasons for political turmoil. The mismanagement of the Haridwar Kumbh Mela and a Covid test scam during the congregation, too, provided opposition parties ammunition to attack the BJP.

But, the issues failed to influence voters as the BJP banked on developmental work including building more roads for better connectivity in far-flung areas, the Centre's allocation of funds for infrastructure development and all-weather connectivity for the Char Dham Yatra.

The AAP, which made its electoral debut in the state, failed to win even a single seat. The party's tactic of winning votes by offering freebies seems to have eaten into the Congress's vote bank and helped the BJP. ●

UTTARAKHAND ELECTION RESULTS

Party	Seats	Vote share (in per cent)
BJP	47	44.34
INC	19	37.91
BSP	2	4.82
Others	2	12.93



VISHNU V. NAIR

MOVING FORWARD

Pramod Sawant celebrating with BJP supporters

WHO WEARS THE CROWN?

It is between Pramod Sawant and Vishwajit Rane for the chief minister's job in Goa

BY DNYANESH JATHAR

The BJP won Goa because of two reasons—the loyal safe-voter and the division of the anti-BJP vote between the Congress, the Trinamool Congress and the AAP. While the BJP won 20, one short of majority, the Congress got only 11, six short of its 2017 tally.

Chief Minister Pramod Sawant won his third election, but with a thin margin. He defeated the Congress's Dharmesh Saglani, who, many believed, had the tacit support of the BJP's Vishwajit Rane, who seems to have chief ministerial ambitions. Rane and wife, Divya, won Valpoi and Poriem.

"I was campaigning in all the constituencies and hardly got a day to spend in my constituency," said Sawant. "My entire campaign was conducted by our party cadre in Sanquelim."

GOA ELECTION RESULTS

Party	Seats	Vote share (in per cent)
BJP	20	33.3
INC	11	23.5
Others	9	43.2

Raju Nayak, editorial director of the Gomantak group of newspapers, told *THE WEEK* that the BJP benefited from the politics of bahunjan samaj. "The chief minister made sure that bahunjan communities were wooed aggressively," he said. "Their views and aspirations were taken into consideration. Another important point is the increasing presence of migrants (who have now become residents and voters in Goa) in all constituencies. These people have favoured the BJP."

Apparently, the BJP's promise of a

"double-engine" push for development won over the fence-sitters.

On the other side, the Congress's state leadership seemed to be too proud and did not form alliances in advance. "State party president Girish Chodankar kept saying that the Congress will win on its own because of the anti-incumbency of 10 years," said Nayak. "It was veteran Digambar Kamat who convinced the party's central leadership that an alliance with players like the Goa Forward Party was necessary. If not for that alliance, the Congress would have dropped to single digits."

The AAP's win in two seats—Velim and Benaulim—has also been an interesting development. The party's hard work since the previous elections has borne fruit in the Christian-majority Salcete region. It is also a warning sign for the Congress that it cannot take the minority vote for granted; Salcete had been its stronghold.

The aggressive "Goa for Goans" politics of the Revolutionary Goans Party helped it win one seat—St. Andre. It would be interesting to see if the BJP can get the party's support for its government.

Another highlight was the Trinamool's poor showing despite its high-pitched campaign. Even former chief minister Churchill Alemao lost in Benaulim; he came third. His daughter, Valanka, also lost in Navelim.

The Trinamool's ally, the Maharashtra Gomantak Party, won two seats. The BJP has said that it has won over two of the three independents, and would even accommodate the MGP. This could be crucial in the selection of the chief minister. Currently, Sawant and Rane are the frontrunners. The Dhavalikar brothers, who run the MGP, are friendly with Rane. ☉