A CRITICAL STUDY ON AAM AADMI PARTY WORKING IN PUNJAB

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ABSTRACT

The political landscape of Punjab is getting more complex with each passing day, and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) remains the main protagonist in the ongoing theatrical mode of politics, so typical of the state. The question in the minds of election analysts is whether a four-year-old party facing two of the oldest surviving parties in India will be able to bring about a critical shift in the bipolar party system well established in the state since the 1997 elections. Punjab for long has been reeling under endemic crises in the form of agrarian distress, drug menace, crony capitalism, corruption and an overall governance deficit. Arguably then, any significant electoral gain for the AAP in the 2017 elections, as in the case of the 2014 parliamentary elections, would signify the desperation of the electorate with the firm grip of the Congress and Akali Dal over the levers of power. This explains why despite being a party lacking in terms of state-wide organizational presence, state-specific agenda or state-level leadership, the AAP as a self-proclaimed movement party, committed to clean and principled politics, with politically novice

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INTRODUCTION

Punjab’s political arena which has had two main competitors, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and Indian National Congress (—henceforth, the Congress) saw the entry of a third key player, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) during the 2014 general elections. AAP won four Lok Sabha seats out of a total of 13 that it contested from Punjab (see Appendix 1). It not only lost every seat it contested elsewhere in the country but 414 out of the 434 candidates it fielded forfeited their
security deposits. I attempt an explanation of this extraordinary electoral performance of AAP in Punjab in 2014 and examine its prospects for the 2017 state assembly elections.

The key to capturing this difference in Punjab lies in understanding its recent political history and more specifically the emergence and suppression of two movements in its contemporary history along with the consequences of the suppression of those movements. These two movements are: the Maoist Naxalite movement of the late 1960s and the Akali morcha (agitation) of the early 1980s for the protection of Punjab’s river water rights and for other economic, political and religious demands, and the subsequent armed Sikh opposition movement against the Operation Blue Star army action at the Golden Temple in 1984.

By analysing the emergence and suppression of the two movements mentioned here, and the political and cultural fallout from the suppression of those two movements, I hope to solve the puzzle of the amazing electoral success of AAP in Punjab while it miserably failed elsewhere in the 2014 general elections. It, of course, performed spectacularly well in the Delhi assembly elections in February 2015.

The forthcoming assembly election in Punjab in early 2017 is receiving much attention as an exceptional election because the emergence of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has not only transformed it into a triangular electoral fight but could end the bipolar electoral system in the state. The Indian National Congress (Congress) had its electoral sway over the state until the states underwent reorganization in 1966. The Akali Dal set the political agenda of Punjabi Suba after 1966, whether in power or not. However, as the state readies for the forthcoming elections, the AAP has emerged as the clear game changer by setting the agenda, identifying and defining important issues and providing a credible challenge to the established parties of the state, namely the Congress and the Akali Dal. The emergence of the AAP in Punjab raises important questions. A bipolar party system is firmly rooted in the state, in the context of thriving identity politics.
The political scene in Punjab is vibrant, with high levels of political participation and contestation. How did a party like the AAP, without a definitive ideology or traditional social or regional support base in the state or state-level leadership or resources manage to mark its presence? Another question that relates to recent developments in the state, with the political landscape of Punjab getting more complex with each passing day, and with the AAP being at the receiving end, is whether the party’s success is going to be long-term or will there be a return to the status-quo in the state? The present paper addresses these two questions, while taking up the recent political developments in the state for detailed discussion.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It is in this political context that the gains for the AAP in 2014 elections have received much attention. The AAP remains a definitive possibility for the emergence of a third alternative. In the 2014 national election, the debutant AAP[1] managed to win four seats, all of them in Punjab.[2] In the state’s 13 constituencies, the AAP finished third in eight Lok Sabha constituencies. Translated into assembly segments, the AAP was ahead of the other parties in 34 out of the 117 assembly constituencies in the state, 18 of them represented by the Akali Dal and 16 by the Congress. The electoral gains for the AAP arguably indicate the desperation of a significant segment of the electorate under the persistent grip of the Congress and Akali Dal over the levers of power in the beleaguered state. Since recovering from militancy, Punjab has been reeling under post-Green Revolution stagnation, drug menace, alleged institutionalized crony capitalism, corruption, and an overall governance deficit. This explains why voters chose to put their faith in the debutant AAP despite the party lacking in terms of organizational presence or a state-specific agenda[3] when the party did so badly in other states including Delhi and Haryana. Those who voted for the party saw AAP as a movement party of volunteers fresh from their participation in the Anna Hazare-led ‘India against corruption’ movement. The party was viewed as committed to clean and principled politics. Arguably, the AAP’s victories in Punjab contributed somewhat to its grand success in Delhi. In the AAP’s electoral victory in Punjab, the rest of the nation saw a three-year old debutant party, taking on two of the oldest parties of the nation that have been entrenched in the state’s politics since colonial days.[4] However, soon after the 2014 elections the dim prognosis of skeptics who saw the party’s success as an aberration seemed to be coming true. Two of its elected Lok Sabha members Dharamveer
Gandhi[5] and Harinder Singh Khalsa [6] and many other volunteers turned rebels following the expulsion of Yogendra Yadav, who had played a significant role in setting up the party in the state.[7] Many of the expelled/deserting volunteers who had shaped the AAP’s impressive electoral debut in Punjab now joined the Swaraj Lehar Abhiyan.[8] Consequently, the AAP became leaderless and the party lost two assembly byelections very badly. The party chose not to contest the third by-election. Akali Dal won all the three by-elections. The Congress did not contest in that round of elections given the fact that the party in power has always had an advantage in by-elections held in Punjab. At this time, when the AAP stood at the threshold of diminishing in Punjab as a one-election wonder, the party leadership in Delhi chalked out its ‘Punjab Mission Plan 2017’ and appointed Durgesh Pathak[9] to build up the party organization in the state. Pathak had earlier managed the AAP campaign in the Delhi assembly elections. He was also involved in the Kejriwal campaign during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections when Kejriwal was pitted against Narendra Modi. In July 2015, Pathak turned Punjab’s 13 Lok Sabha constituencies into zones for organizational purposes and the party leadership in Delhi appointed an observer/zonal-in-charge for each zone. These 13 leaders were part of Pathak’s 181 Ashutosh Kumar: Aam Aadmi Party team from Delhi. [10] Pathak further sub-divided the zones into 39 sectors and each sector into three assembly constituencies. An observer was appointed to each sector by the Delhi leadership represented in the state by Pathak and Sanjay Singh. Some of these observers were district-in-charges previously and were loyal to the local leaders. The ‘Punjab plan’ led to large-scale purging of all rebellious elements and gave leadership positions to only those loyal to the Delhi leadership. Sucha Singh Chhotepur, the party’s state convener since 2014, played a key role. Like him, the other leaders promoted by the party from Punjab, i.e., Bhagwant Mann, H. S. Phoolka and Kanwar Sandhu belong to the populous, land-owning Jat Sikh community. Over the past two years, under this new dispensation, the party is off to a fresh start with a newly launched recruitment drive, wellattended public rallies, door-to-door campaigns, and allowing entry of select leaders from other political parties (like Sukhpal Khaira from the Congress). These efforts appear to be successful, as opinion polls/media reports about the AAP are encouraging and highlight the party’s popularity among the state’s youth and the influential Punjabi Diaspora.
PUNJAB’S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

After the partition of India, the Congress dominated politics in Punjab. Following the reorganization of the state in 1966, either the Congress or the Akali Dal formed the state’s governments, either as the single party in power (in the case of the Congress) or as part of a coalition government (in the case of the Akali Dal). The Akali Dal has formed coalition governments with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as well as the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) party (Table 1). Since 1997, the BJP as a junior ally of Akali Dal has remained part of the coalition governments formed in 1997 and then in 2007 and 2012. The two mainstream left-wing parties, namely CPI and CPI (M), which were once significant enough to have alliances with the Akali Dal (1980) on respectable terms and with the Congress (1997 and 2002) – though as a diminished ally – have become less relevant over the period. The two communist parties have polled less than two per cent of votes in the last three assembly elections and not having won a single seat since the 2002 elections (Table 1 and 2). The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is another political party that has become less relevant in Punjab over time after a promising start. If there were to be a party in Punjab’s post-militancy period that could have emerged as a relevant, if not a winnable party, it is the BSP. In a state with nearly one-third of its population belonging to the scheduled castes (SCs), the BSP with its social support base among the lower castes, especially the SCs, was expected to present the third alternative after its impressive debut in 1992. The founding president of the BSP, Kanshi Ram, was a Punjabi from Ropar. Ram is credited with winning the Lok Sabha seat of Hoshiarpur in 1996, a rare feat for a SC candidate to win from an unreserved seat in India’s electoral democracy. The decline of the party in Punjab has coincided with the ascendance of Mayawati as the party chief in the post-Kanshi Ram period. Under Mayawati, the party concentrated its focus and energy on capturing and retaining political power in Uttar Pradesh. In the process, the party leadership, mainly drawn from Uttar Pradesh, largely neglected Punjab. As a result, the party has floundered in the state, securing less than five percent of the polled votes in the last two assembly elections. Besides, the apathy of the party leadership, internal factionalism, allegation of “ticket”-selling and a tacit understanding with the Akali leadership have all had a negative impact on the party’s performance in the state.

It is also important to note that the politically marginalized scheduled castes in Punjab are better off socially as well as economically than their counterparts in other Indian states. The Green
Revolution caused an increase in wages in Punjab. The mostly-landless scheduled castes have benefitted significantly from this wage increase. The scheduled castes in Punjab, especially those belonging to the Chamar caste, benefited greatly from social reform movements like the Ad-Dharam and Ravidassia movements. One significant reason for the electoral marginalization of scheduled castes in Punjab, as elsewhere in the country, is the presence of hierarchies in the community. These hierarchies lead to factionalism that can cause the various caste-based groups - Chamars, Mazhabs, Balmikis - to have very different opinions on matters and very different methods to mobilize political change. For instance, some of these groups use music to this end. Interestingly, even their music reflects the differences in the means employed.

THE SIKH DIMENSION

One aspect of Punjab, which distinguishes it from all other states, is that it is the homeland of the Sikh people. Punjab is the only state where the Sikhs are in a majority. They constitute 1.7% of India’s population but about 58% of that of Punjab. About 77% of India’s total Sikh population is settled in Punjab in contrast to their marginal presence in a majority of the other states (see Appendix 2). The majority status for the Sikhs in Punjab is a relatively recent phenomenon which took place only after the territorial reorganisation of Punjab on a linguistic basis on 1 November 1966.

This duality of the Sikh location – a minority in India but a majority in Punjab – is a continuing source of political conflict and tension between the Sikh majority Punjab and Hindu majority India. This duality offers a primary insight into understanding the difference between electoral trends in Punjab and most other states. The absence of the Narendra Modi wave in Punjab during the 2014 general election when it was considered to be the major influence in other states, especially in north and west India, is a telling illustration of this dialectic.

Even when there is convergence of electoral trends in Punjab and the rest of India as, for example, during the emergence of the electoral success of regional parties in the 1967 assembly elections in many states or the anti-Congress vote in the general election after the Emergency, this convergence manifests itself through the regional specificity of Punjab. Both during the 1967 assembly elections and post-Emergency general election in 1977, the regional specificity in Punjab manifests itself through the massive electoral victories of SAD, which so far has been
almost the sole articulator of Punjab’s regional interests and the Sikh community’s political aspirations[2]. This political monopoly of SAD is being questioned in the wake of political change brought about by the AAP upsurge in Punjab.

The foundations of the Sikh faith, which imparts distinctive character to Punjab’s political culture, were laid by Guru Nanak (1469–1539) who came from an upper-caste Hindu Khatri background but rebelled, even as a child, against the practices of his parents’ faith. He soon matured as a great spiritual teacher, poet and communicator choosing Punjabi, the language of the masses in Punjab, as his medium of communication in opposition to Sanskrit and Arabic chosen by the priestly class of the two dominant religions—Hindu and Islam—of that time in Punjab.

**THE SIKH MILITANT MOVEMENT, ITS SUPPRESSION AND THE CONSEQUENCES FOR AAP**

The Sikh militant movement against the Indian state had one big similarity with the 1960s and 1970s Naxalite movement. Both inspired the Sikh youth in Punjab and both were brutally crushed by the power of the Indian state. The spread of the Sikh movement was far wider and its suppression was much deeper than the Naxalite movement (Singh 2008, 2010, Pettigrew 1995, Mahmood 1996). While the suppression of the Naxalite movement affected thousands of families, the suppression of the Sikh militant movement affected hundreds of thousands of families whose members were liquidated by India’s security forces or tortured, abused, humiliated or subjected to extortion. Punjab has 12,581 villages (Government of Punjab 2013: 3) and every village has one or more families whose members were either liquidated or tortured. Some villages had many such families, for example, Sur Singh Wala village in Amritsar district which had nearly 100 of its young men liquidated by the Indian state.

This large scale suppression of a movement which was widely spread out through the state left a substantial section of the Sikh population disgruntled, angry, humiliated and rebellious but without a political home in any of the existing political parties. At one stage around 1989, these angry masses did find a political home in the Simranjeet Singh Mann-led Akali Dal and this resulted in massive election victories of candidates supported by it, in the Lok Sabha elections in Punjab. However, Mann was not able to organise this support in a sustainable manner, and
literally millions who had voted his candidates to victories again became homeless politically. Some of those supporters were reintegrated into the mainstream Akali Dal led by Parkash Singh Badal but a strong residue of discontentment against existing political parties remained.

**CONCLUSION**

AAP staged stunning electoral victories from Punjab during the 2014 general elections. This was in sharp contrast to its candidates losing every seat it contested in the rest of India. The explanation of AAP’s unique electoral success in Punjab lies in the specificity of Punjab namely that it is the only Sikh majority state in India. Two movements in Punjab which had substantial base amongst the Sikh population—the Maoist/Naxalite movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the Sikh militant movement against the Indian state in the 1980s and 1990s—were crushed brutally by state terrorism.

The suppression of these two movements left large sections of the Sikh population angry and humiliated and at the same time without a political home among any of the existing political parties. The emergence of AAP on the political scene energised sections of the Sikh population that had been left discontented as a result of the suppression of these two movements. These politically reactivated individuals and groups with backgrounds in the Naxalite and Sikh militant movements provided the enthusiastic foot soldiers for AAP’s election machine in Punjab. No other political party had been able to win such a large number of activists especially from the younger generation to their party fold. These activists were the key to the electoral success of AAP in Punjab in 2014.

**REFERENCES**


