

Making Sense of the 2017 Punjab Assembly Election Results

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This paper is an attempt to provide an overview on the structures and processes operating during the assembly elections held in Punjab in February 2017. The first section of the paper explains the significance of these elections before discussing the results. For example, these were the first Punjab elections which saw a serious triangular contest and also showed a huge upsurge in youth participation which brought many new issues into the election arena. The second section focuses on the major differences between the 2017 and previous elections. For example these elections used new modes of participation and mobilization strategies, professional and technical approaches, especially use of social media, and sustained focus on critical issues of drugs, crime and mis-governance. These differences illustrate new and previously unexplored facets of the Punjabi electorate which may have been crucial in explaining outcomes. Based largely on media reports, this paper not only provides a summary of the major issues facing the electorate but also explores reasons why the Congress Party countered national trends by gaining a victory.

Introduction

Every election throws up new challenges and questions for analysts but the latest elections to the Punjab Legislative Assembly in 2017 had been unique in many ways and call for a deeper analysis. It goes without saying that elections are the most important and vital feature of any democratic system which ensures the participation of people in the formation of government. With changing times the process of elections is also undergoing transformation. The new technological dimensions that are being added to modern life are also impacting the choices, manner and the method of making political choices. With the expansion of media and market forces into private and public spheres, public discourse is also going through new unprecedented transformations. Electronic visual media and other forms of media are being aggressively used to condition the perceptions of people. All these factors became more visible and decisive in impacting the outcome in the recent assembly elections in Punjab. The present paper is an attempt to understand the structures and processes in the unfolding of this historic political event.

The political history of Punjab can be divided into several time frames such as pre-independence period, the period between 1947 and 1966 and the post 1966 era. The present-day geographical Punjab is the result of a decade long movement popularly known as the 'Punjabi Suba Movement'. As a result, 'subsequently in September 1966, the Punjab province was further trifurcated under Punjab reorganisation Bill. As a result, the southern, Hindi-speaking plain

districts were carved to create a new state of Haryana, inheriting 35.80 percent of territory and 37.37 percent of population. The other Hindi-speaking hill areas to the north of Punjab were merged with neighbouring Himachal Pradesh that received 23 percent of population and 7 percent of the territory of the post partition Punjab' (Anand, 1976:262).

Recently, in November 2016, the state celebrated the golden jubilee of Punjabi Suba. This half a century of political journey of the state has witnessed a mixture of highs and lows, which include years of emergency and resistance to it, terrorism, insurgency and President's rule on various occasions that at times extended for a period of more than eight years. The initial few years witnessed instability with four different governments being formed and President's rule being imposed twice between 1967 and 1972. According to Arora 'the seeds of instability were sown in as early as 1952' (Arora, 1990). Post reorganisation, the state again witnessed a phase of President's Rule in the year 1968. As argued by Sethy 'Congress could not secure majority support in the election. A United Front Ministry under Gurnam Singh assumed power. The ministry fell victim to political machinations and defections. A defectors group with the help of Congress was able to form the government. When Congress withdrew support the Governor had no choice except recommending the imposition of President's Rule' (Sethy 2003). It was not until 1972 that the Indian National Congress (INC) won with a clear majority and was able to complete a full five year term in the office. Since then Punjab has witnessed assembly elections several times, 9 times since 1972, and the process of elections has undergone significant changes since then. As Kumar states 'Over last three decades virtually a bipolar party system has come to stay in the state, where power has been alternating between the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and the Congress as the two major contenders for power' (Kumar, 2005:111).

The only occasion when the contest became triangular with a third front challenging to wrest control of the state has been in the recent election. Commenting on this aspect *The Indian Express* concluded 'While Punjab has mostly seen bipolar fights with SAD and Congress being traditional rivals, the AAP or Aam Aadmi Party, buoyed by its performance in the Lok Sabha elections, is the new entrant in state politics' (The Indian Express, 2017). Although there are examples of the emergence of political outfits like Sarb Hind Shiromani Akali Dal (SHSAD) in 2002 and Peoples Party of Punjab (PPP) in 2012 trying to make the contest triangular, they were never serious contenders for forming a government in the state.

The recent Punjab Assembly elections have witnessed a single party i.e the Indian National Congress (INC) convincingly return to power after a gap of ten years in the state. The outcome bears a larger significance as the party otherwise is on a downward trend elsewhere in the country ever since it lost the country's general elections in 2014. To understand how the state reversed the national trend and other dimensions of the election process, a closer look at the various aspects of the recent assembly elections is warranted.

A Look at Voter Turnout and Vote Share

Table 1: Voter Turnout in Last Three Assembly Elections

Year	Male	Female	Trans-gender	Total	Voting %
2007	65,50,255	61,00,419	N.A	1,26,57,285	75.40%
2012	72,78,468	66,14,316	00	1,38,92,784	78.20%
2017	80,58,673	73,27,491	98	1,53,86,262	77.40%

Source: Statistical Abstract 2012 & www.ceopunjab.nic.in

The comparison of the voter turnout in the 2017 assembly elections with the last two assembly elections in the state is given in Table 1 above and it shows that this has remained consistently on the higher side. The voter turnout in the recent 2017 elections was 77.4% while in 2012 it was 78.2% and in the 2007 elections it was 75.40% (ECI Punjab, 2017). Another aspect that has remained similar over the last elections is participation of women voters. Interestingly, the participation of women voters repeated the trend from the 2012 assembly elections and they outnumbered men participants. Commenting on the gender aspect of the election, the *Hindustan Times* stated:

‘A total of 78.14% (93.75 lakh) women exercised their franchise, while 76.69% (80.54 lakh) men voters cast their vote. There are 93.75 lakh women and 1.05 crore male voters in the state. Polling by transgenders was not encouraging as of the 415 voters, only 91 (22%) of them exercised their franchise. In the 2012 assembly polls too, women recorded higher voting percentage of 79% against the 78% of men’ (Hindustan Times, 2017).

Vote Share of Political Parties

The only area that has seen a significant change is the vote share of various parties. As we can see from Table 2, the three major traditional parties i.e the INC, SAD and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) all witnessed a drop in their vote share mainly because of the entry of the new political outfit in the state i.e Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

Table 2: Party-wise Vote Share of Major Parties

YEAR	INC	SAD	BJP	AAP	LIP
2007	40.90%	37.09%	8.28%	N.A	N.A
2012	40.11%	34.75%	7.13%	N.A	N.A
2017	38.5%	25.2%	5.4%	23.7%	1.2%

Source: www.eci.nic.in

While INC managed the highest vote share at 38.5%, it is ironically 1.5% less than what it got in the 2012 assembly elections. At that time the party managed to secure only 44 seats and lost to the SAD-BJP combine which had a vote share

of 34.7% and 7.2% respectively. In the recent elections SAD saw a major drop in its vote share from 34.7% to 25.2% and at the same time BJP dropped from 7.2% to 5.4%. This drastic fall in the vote share, especially in the case of SAD and BJP, can be attributed to the entry of AAP, which made the contest triangular in a real sense in the state. AAP managed to capture a 23.7% vote share in its very first assembly elections. The major reason for this has to be the anti-incumbency sentiment against the ruling SAD-BJP government as well as the resolve of the people of the state to give an opportunity to a party other than the traditional parties i.e INC and SAD-BJP combine.

Table 3: Party-wise Seat Share in Assembly in the Last Three Elections

YEAR	INC	SAD	BJP	AAP	LIP
2007	37.60%	41.02%	16.23%	N.A	N.A
2012	39.31%	47.86%	10.25%	N.A	N.A
2017	65.8%	12.8%	2.56%	17.09%	1.7%

Source: www.ceopunjab.nic.in

An analytical look at Tables 2 and able 3 would indicate that there no one to one relation between vote share and seats, which means that higher vote share is not an automatic criteria for higher number of seats. This largely reflects the imbalance in the potential electorate size in different constituencies, among other factors.

Major Issues Dominating the 2017 Election

For a better understanding of the recent assembly election result, we need to look closely into major issues around which the elections were contested.

1. Drugs and Drug Addiction: The issue of drug addiction emerged as one of the most important issue during the recent state elections. After decline of the Sikh militant movement there was a rise of drug smuggling and drug addiction, especially in the last decade. It was a common belief that the drug business prospered due to the political and police patronage. Since the ruling government over the last decade was under the control of the SAD-BJP coalition, it was natural for the opposition to hold these parties responsible. The opposition parties had been claiming that the problem of drugs reached a situation that if it was not controlled immediately, it could potentially grip the entire state. The youth, in particular have been the worst effected section of society due to drug addiction. There were wild claims that 70% to 80% of Punjabi youth were in the grip of the drug menace. Though there is no credible or unbiased evidence and few comprehensive academic studies to identify the magnitude of the problem, this has not stopped the debate raging around it, especially in the media and among politicians. According to the Indian Express:

'Punjab has been grappling with a serious drug problem. Opioid consumption in the state has been degenerating its youth for years. In fact, according to a study conducted by the National Drug Dependence Treatment Centre at AIIMS, about 76 per cent of drug consumers belong to the age group of 18-35 years. The research, conducted across 10 districts in Punjab, also reflects that in a 2.77 crore state population, 2.3 lakh individuals are dependent on opioid, while 1.23 lakh are addicted to heroin' (The Indian Express, 2017).

On the basis of such reports the Congress President, Rahul Gandhi, declared that the youth of Punjab is in the grip of drugs. In response, the national president of the BJP declared to hold rally against the drug problem in Punjab. The Deputy Chief Minister Sukhbir Badal, on the other hand countered by stating that it was all propaganda to defame the people of Punjab. He also organised protest rallies in the border areas to highlight that cross border smuggling should be stopped. Some of the arrested smugglers also accused some highly-placed individuals in the Punjab government, including Cabinet Ministers, of supporting their activities. During the election days, a movie *Uda Punjab* was released that highlighted the drug menace in Punjab. Since the Punjab government opposed the release of this movie this gave the impression that the government was not keen on allowing an open debate on the issue. All these factors brought the issue of drug addiction to the centre stage. All the parties contesting the election made claims to solve the problem if they were given chance to form the government.

2. Religious issues: The issue of sacrilege of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and other holy scriptures of the Sikh community was yet another reason which played an important role in these elections. The Indian Express gave their own angle on the issue by stating that 'In an indication of rise in communal politics in the state, the past one and a half years witnessed several instances of desecration of the Guru Granth Sahib, sparking unrest across the state' (The Indian Express, 9 Jan, 2017). The issue first entered the public domain almost one and a half year before the elections when on October 12, 2015 some torn pages of the holy book were found in the village Bargari, located in the Faridkot district of the Malwa region. There were instant protests in the area and two protesters were killed in the police firing. The Government was unable to control similar incidents of sacrilege in other areas of the state as well. The inability of the last government to control such incidents and take action against the culprits caused a major setback for them, especially in the rural segments. The Sikh hardliners were of the belief that it is being done by the followers of Dera Sacha Sauda with implicit connivance of Punjab government due to political reasons. Interestingly right before the assembly elections the Chief of Dera Sacha Sauda sent an apology to Sikh high priests for his previous actions which hurt the feelings of Sikh sangat. This apology was quickly accepted and he was exonerated. This act also created more bitterness among devout Sikhs and the apology had to be retracted soon after.

There was another episode in which torn pages of the holy Quran were thrown on the road from a speeding vehicle in the Muslim dominated town of Malerkotla, inciting communal feelings. The government on its part arrested a leader of AAP from Delhi, who denied his role in the episode.

All such incidents reflected poorly on the government and created a perception that the government is deliberately raking up such issues to divide the electorate on religious and communal lines.

3. River Water Sharing (SYL): With the formation of Punjabi Suba some problems got tagged permanently with it, for instance the issue of Punjabi speaking areas left out of Punjab, the issue of capital Chandigarh, which is shared between Punjab and Haryana and the most emotive issue among these, river water sharing. These issues have been pet SAD issues because these give legitimacy to a regional party and a stick to beat the Central governments, which meant Congress for most of the time.

It was in 1977 when an agreement to share the river waters was signed by Parkash Singh Badal, to link up river Satluj and river Yamuna which later became known as the Satluj Yamuna Link (SYL). In 1982, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, formally inaugurated the digging of the link stream, but there were protests which were later converted into a 'dharam yudh morcha' which was ultimately taken over by the Sikh militant movement for one and a half decade. In 2004, the then Congress Chief Minister Capt. Amrinder Singh unilaterally terminated all water agreements of the Punjab state with all other states. According to the Punjab Govt. notification 'Notwithstanding anything contained in any other law for the time being in force and any judgement, decree, order and decision of any Court, Tribunal or authority, the Agreements shall be deemed to have been terminated with effect from the respective date, they were executed or made, as the case may be' (Punjab Government, 2004). Since then the issue is under the consideration of the Supreme Court.

The farming community forms one of the largest sections of population of Punjab and given the fast depleting water table in the state, non-availability of adequate water for irrigation purposes is one of the most sensitive issues for the community. All the political parties, in order to ensure votes from this large section of voters, claimed to be against water sharing with other states. This issue again became one of the important issues in this election. Amarinder Singh had been most forthright on this issue since he took the strong action of cancelling the water agreements. The SAD has also been raising this issue with full vigour, but AAP kept wavering on this issue. Its Convener, being the Chief Minister of Delhi and himself belonging to the state of Haryana, had his own political compulsions in not taking a firm stand.

4. Corruption: Corruption is an evergreen issue of Indian politics and it still remains a burning issue because it hurts the common people most. The situation in Punjab is no different from the rest of the country. During last decade of SAD-BJP rule it became more institutionalised in almost all spheres of the state.

Common people have been at the receiving end because of this situation. Hence this was one of the major issues in the recent state elections.

5. Monopolisation of business: Another form of institutionalised corruption is monopoly control over all financial and political resources. It has been practiced by many regional parties in different parts of the country but in the case of Punjab it has been implemented on a larger scale. The main politicians from the outgoing SAD-BJP government were accused of monopolising all the businesses in the state. There were allegations of businesses like transportation, liquor, cable network and sand mining being run by politicians in power which in turn was causing huge losses to the public exchequer. The opposition parties accused the ruling party of misusing their public offices to benefit personal businesses.

6. Mafia control and law and order: The presence of drug and liquor, sand, cable and transport mafias operating in the state under the patronage of politicians had been a major issue in the run up to these elections. As reported by the Indian Express 'Punjab is also notoriously known for its liquor mafia. While the SAD-BJP government has been in power, there have been an unprecedented rise in the number of murders related to illicit liquor trade in Punjab. In October 2016, the killing of a 28-year-old Manish Luthra in Jalandhar, who had objected to bootlegging in his colony, made headlines' (The Indian Express, 2017).

The major happenings of crime like an attack on a Sikh religious leader on a main highway and major jail break in Nabha in Patiala district and the admission by government that here (there) are 58 gangs of criminals operating in Punjab, highlighted the subversion of law and order machinery by the previous government. Common people were suffering and state was facing huge losses in terms of its earnings because of this criminal, politician and police nexus. Hence, this issue was highlighted by the opposition parties to target the ruling combine during the election campaign.

7. Farmer suicides and Indebtedness: Agrarian crisis and farmer suicides have been yet another burning issue in the last election although the issue has been raised for several years earlier. The agrarian crisis has led the farmers of the state into a deadly trap of debt. Increasing costs of inputs, failed crops and exploitation at the hands of moneylenders have led hundreds to distressed farmers to commit suicides. The Indian Express explained 'According to a study by the Indian Council of Social Science Research about 48.6 per cent of farmers who have committed suicide fall below the age of 35 years. The ruling state government has been accused by the opposition for its incompetence to address the issue' (The Indian Express, 2017). Taking note of the seriousness of the issue, all parties promised to address the problem as a matter of priority. Congress promised to waive off the loan of farmers and abolish the system of 'kurki' of the land on failing to repay the loan and AAP launched a special 'kisan manifesto' to address farmer's problems.

Analysis of the Election Process and Outcomes

The process of this assembly election and its outcomes have shown some qualitative differences from earlier elections. The following is a brief analytical commentary on the major differences.

1. Shrinking base of Ideology based Parties: Parties such as BSP and CPI, CPI-M have lost their electoral base to other parties such as AAP and INC. The recent election saw further erosion of the Bahujan Samaj Party, CPI and CPI-M vote share as they have fallen from 4.3% to 1.5% for BSP and from 0.82 to 0.2 for CPI and CPI-M over the 2012 election compared with the 2017 assembly elections. A major portion of the vote bank of these parties shifted towards the AAP.

Table 4: Vote Share of Other Parties over Last Three Elections

YEAR	BSP	SAD(M)	CPI	INDEPENDENT	CPI(M)
2007	4.13%	-	3.31%	-	2.25%
2012	4.30%	0.28%	0.82%	6.76%	0.16%
2017	1.50%	0.30%	0.20%	2.10%	-

Source: www.ceopunjab.nic.in

The election results also highlights the end game for ideology based political groups and the rise of interest based politics in which change of party does not entail any political guilt or remorse.

2. Enhanced participation of youth: Out of the 19.7 million voters comprising 10.4 million male and 9.31 million female voters, according to media reports roughly 10.5 million (53%) belonged to the age group of 18-39 years. It was widely expected and reported by media that the younger voters would hold the key to these elections. These demographic factors compelled all political parties to focus upon the youth for their electoral strategies. Since the youth are usually considered as pro-change and anti-establishment by temperament, it gave a slight upper edge to the new entrant, the Aam Adami Party (AAP). The entry of AAP did ensure the active participation of youth and increased levels of interest in the whole electoral process. From participating in campaigning to encouraging more and more people to vote, to actively participating in the voting process, youth played a very active role as compared to earlier elections.

3. Role of social media: With every passing election the role of technology is increasing in the electoral process. This has both positive and negative aspects. The Lok Sabha election of 2014 saw a major change in the way technology and communication had been used in the elections. The recent state elections witnessed a huge role of social networking sites and applications such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. According to a report by *India Today* ‘There

are 13.46 million internet users in Punjab out of which 8.75 are urban and 4.71 are rural and around 30 lakh among these are of the 18-35 age group'. Almost all participating parties have their social media cells being monitored by technical experts. AAP has around 9 lakh followers of its facebook account while Congress is claiming to have 9.31 followers on facebook' (India Today, 2017). Due to social media all forms of information was circulated among the people almost instantly. One major drawback of these platforms has been spread of rumours, fake news and false propoganda to misguide and mislead the electorate.

4. Campaigning: Campaigning for assembly election 2017 started almost one and a half years prior to the anticipated election date. The race among ticket aspirants, changes in organisational structures and of course party hopping and change of loyalties by ticket probables was quite visible. With a new party, AAP, entering the fray, ensured a dramatic and surprise element in the campaigning. There were power struggle within AAP for leadership in the initial phase, which led to the removal of its state convener S. Sucha Singh Chottepur on August 26, 2016 after a controversial sting operation and allegations of corruption. This incident highlighted organisational ad-hocism and immaturity of its leadership. This created a vacuum in the top leadership of AAP in Punjab. In the meantime on July 18, 2016 Mr. Navjot Singh Sidhu, a high profile MP from the BJP, resigned his parliamentary seat and membership of the BJP. It created a sort of stir with the possibilities of his joining AAP. Negotiations went on for months and then he declared he was forming a new political front '*Awaz-e-Punjab*', along with his supporters like the Olympian Pargat Singh and the Bains brothers from Ludhiana. But after the failure of talks with AAP he joined Congress on Jan 15, 2017 along with Pargat Singh and his other supporters but the Bains brothers formed the *Lok Insaf Party* (LIP) and forged an alliance with the AAP.

As far as the management of campaigning is concerned, almost all parties had hired professional campaign managers who had formed professional and technical organisations. Apart from this, numerous dramatic changes have been witnessed in these elections in the innovative forms of campaigning. Traditional methods of campaigning such as carrying out large election rallies gave way to those based on one to one approach, focus on small groups held in colonies, in residential areas, door to door campaigns, '*nukad* meetings', groups of professionals, etc. Though the big rallies were conducted by national and state level leaders, candidates themselves preferred door to door canvassing and addressing small groups of people. This change could be credited to the AAP, as they were the first to start this style of campaigning with other parties following them. With new actors entering the fray, the campaign saw more people from the entertainment industry, especially singers and TV artists directly contesting elections. In earlier times, these people were usually used by the political parties to attract larger crowds.

5. Role of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs): The role of Non Resident Indians (NRIs) is gradually increasing in the political affairs of Punjab, but this election

saw a qualitative change. The NRIs from North America especially Canada and USA and from some European countries like UK, Germany and Italy came together in large numbers. Most of these NRIs were vocal supporters of AAP. According to an India Today report ‘According to an estimate nearly 4,000 NRI Punjabis from 25 countries including Canada, America and United Kingdom besides others are currently canvassing for Aam Aadmi Party’ (India Today, 2017)

Interestingly most of these NRIs were from western countries, though a large number of Punjabis are also residing in UAE and Arab Countries and numerous in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. This enthusiastic participation from NRI’s added some colour to the campaigning especially on social media. They created an impression in some circles of the educated middle class, especially among youth, that AAP was going to sweep these elections. Many among those who could not travel to Punjab, tried to influence the voters through their local links and by sending supporting messages and phone calls.

6. Role of Religious Deras: Role of different deras and their followers has been matter of speculations and raised a controversy during the two past elections. There are a number of deras which claim to have influence over a large number of voters in different areas. The main among these are Dera Radha Soami, Beas, which wields influence all over Punjab but its main influence is in the Majha area. There are two important deras in the Doaba area, namely Noor Mahal also known as *Divya Jyoti Sansthan* and *Dera Sach Khand* of Ballan which wields considerable influence over the dalit population of Doaba. In the Malwa region the most influential and controversial dera is *Dera Sacha Sauda* of Sirsa, while some other deras also have local influence. Apart from these deras there are some sects and personalities known as ‘Babas’ who wield influence over Sikh devotees. Most of these Babas are loosely united under the banner of *Sant Samaj* led by the Damdami Taksal. Leaving aside few individual religious ‘Sants’ most of the Deras and Sant Samaj were openly supporting the SAD BJP combine.

Until a few days prior to voting there was speculation about the support of Dera Sacha Sauda, but when the Dera openly declared support towards SAD-BJP, it was clear that all deras are supporting SAD-BJP. Defeat of the ruling combine raises many questions about the *actual* influence of these deras and their capacity to convert their following into a vote bank.

8. Women representation in the state: Punjab has been a state which witnessed an increase in women representation in the assembly with every election. But the recent assembly election results have reversed the trend. In 2012, a total of 12% of the seats were won by female candidates, which during the 2017 election come down to just 5% of the total seats contested.

Table 5: Women Representation in Punjab Assembly over Three Elections

Year	Number of Female	% of Females in Assembly
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	Legislators	
2007	7	5.98%
2012	14	11.96%
2017	6	5.1%

Source: www.ceopunjab.nic.in

Lack of gender representation in the Punjab Assembly is a major cause of concern and it would require a further in-depth study to explain why 14 women candidates were able to win out of a total of 93 who contested in the 2012 election but this time only 6 were elected while a total 81 contested seats.

9. Vote split within families: Another trend that has been witnessed in these elections was the split of votes on the basis of age group within the families. While the youth went with the new party AAP, senior members opted for tried and tested traditional parties. In earlier elections, the entire family was assumed to vote for a single candidate or party but this time things appeared to be different according to the Lokniti-CSDS data. Earlier youth was not so vocal regarding their electoral choices, but this time youth of 18 to 35 years was open and vocal in asserting their electoral preferences.

10. Selection of candidates and distribution of tickets: the issues of dynastic politics and political control under a few affluent families have concerned common people for some time. AAP was the first party to openly voice its opinion on this issue and carried out an elaborate exercise including conducting meetings and inviting applications to select the candidates but the actual ticket distribution by the party high command became a subject of controversy. Most of the rejected candidates alleged that money changed hands during ticket distribution in AAP. Its leadership had always maintained that it will allot tickets to common people who want to serve the society in the right spirit and are not there in politics to make a quick buck. Partly in response to this, Congress also changed its approach and announced that it will allot only 'one ticket per one family' ensuring larger participation and giving a better chance to deserving candidates. It implemented this policy very strictly and gained politically on this initiative.

11. Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT): The introduction of a Voter-verified paper audit trail (VVPAT) for the first time in any elections of the state was a welcome step ensuring greater transparency in the process of conducting elections. However, it was introduced only in 33 constituencies out of the total 117, though there were demands for it to be implemented in all constituencies. Of these 33 constituencies, 22 were district headquarters and the remaining 11 were declared as high-profile constituencies. After the election results were announced AAP alleged that there was manipulation of electronic voting machines (EVMs). AAP has been blaming the Election Commission of

conspiring with the central government and in tampering EVMs to influence the results.

12. None of the Above (NOTA): The option of NOTA was given to the voters by the Election Commission if voters did not find any candidate suitable for election. The use of this option by voters saw a considerable increase in these elections. A total number of around 1.08 lakh voters chose the option of NOTA which is a record.

The Failure of Third Alternative: Understanding the AAP debacle

The unique feature of this election was the emergence of a credible third alternative, AAP, to the traditional political parties namely the SAD-BJP combine and Congress. The emergence of AAP in Punjab created such a euphoria that almost all pre-poll predictions and exit poll results declared that AAP will form the next government. Having its main base in educated middle class, youth and NRIs, the most vocal sections of society, its supporters created an impression that its victory was certain and the issue was largely of extent of the victory margin. They completely dominated social media, drawing room discussions and other places of social discourses. It seemed that AAP had its base in most visible sections of society and got misled by the illusion which was largely of its own creation. The reasons for the failure of this experiment in Punjab needs a deeper look (see Ram, 2017 and also his article in this special issue – ed.). The following is an analytical account of the rise and failure of AAP in Punjab.

The Emergence of AAP

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is a new political party whose name etymologically means 'the Common Man's Party'. It is an outcome of the Anna Hazare's India Against Corruption Movement. This movement gained momentum around 5th April 2011, attracted a large number of civil society activists, intellectuals, professionals and artists. It was a non-political movement but after its initial failure to achieve any substantive victory, differences emerged between Anna Hazare and Arvind Kejriwal about the future strategy and participation in politics. Anna Hazare was against participation in electoral and power politics while Kejriwal was for it. Ultimately Kejriwal and a number of other close colleagues, established AAP as political party on 26 November 2011 and fought the Delhi assembly election of 2013, winning 28 seats out of 70 and emerging as the single largest party. It formed the government but Kejriwal resigned after 49 days. The next election that the party contested was the general election of 2014. In these elections the party could manage to win only four seats out of the 432 seats it contested nationwide. Interestingly all of these four Lok Sabha seats that the party won were from Punjab. The party managed to get 24.4% vote share in the state. This fact provided a great reason

for the party to believe that Punjab could be the state that could give the party a much needed platform to fulfil their national dream. In order to give the party a winning start, the party did not contest any other election that followed, and patiently waited for Punjab Assembly Elections. The party steadily built a strong network at grassroots level by involving people from various walks of life and highlighting the major problems faced by the state like drugs, unemployment, corruption and financial burden on the state exchequer (Kumar, 2015). During the 2017 Punjab Assembly election, though the party retained its vote share gained in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, at the same time it lost majority of its assembly segments it had won in 2014. Of the total 112 seats it contested, it won only 20 out of which 11 were from the segments that it managed to win in 2014, while 9 were from new segments (Ram, 2017).

Some Reasons for the Poor Performance of AAP

- 1. Arrogance of AAP Leadership:** Given that the party emerged out of the anti-corruption movement, this was always going to be an important test on its behaviour. It had been claiming to be the only honest party committed to an alternative clean politics. It kept its focus on the negativity of others including a large number of its own leaders who deserted or were expelled at different times. Two of its four Members of Parliament from Punjab were suspended for anti-party activities. Total control of the party remained in the hands of central leadership which comprised of a few individuals, especially Kejriwal loyalists. It does not have any mature organizational structure and rather functions on the principles of ad-hocism. Most of the Punjab leaders have publically stated that they were not involved in the decision making process of the party. Its own workers were alleged to have organised sting operations against its leaders at the bidding of central leadership. The apparent support of central leadership to such activities reflected poorly on the maturity of leadership. The distribution of tickets to number of defectors from other parties and the neglect of grassroots workers had plagued its initial stages of campaign. But with high hope on victory, due to anti-incumbency, most leaders and workers fell in line.
- 2. Focus on Malwa region:** AAP's major focus was on the Malwa region which accounts for almost 60% of the total number of seats of the entire state. Since it won all its four Lok Sabha seats from this region in 2014, it relied heavily on this region and invested its entire energy in this region. This resulted in complete rout of the party in Majha region and very poor performance in the Doaba region. Even in Malwa region the party was not able to feel the pulse of the people and was completely out of touch with the ground reality.
- 3. Support from hardliners:** The party was accused of being backed by the Sikh hardliners especially NRIs who allegedly had affiliation to the

Khalistan movement, creating fear among a section of society. A perception gained ground that it's coming to power could facilitate the return of religious extremism in the state. This opinion among the people resulted in drifting away of the moderate Sikhs and Hindu voters especially in urban areas.

4. **Chief Ministerial candidate:** Among the three major contenders in the elections, both Congress and SAD-BJP combine had declared their Chief Ministerial candidates before the elections were held in the state. AAP was the only party which had not declared its CM candidate for the elections and this was one issue which provided political mileage to its opponents. The other parties continuously alleged that the party was making efforts to anoint an outsider as the ruler of the state, which did not go down well with the voters of the state. Not declaring the CM candidate of the party before the elections proved to be a disastrous step. Failed talks between AAP and leaders like Navjot Singh Sidhu and Pargat Singh and inability of the party to rope in these leaders further strengthened the opinion that the Delhi leadership did not want any strong leader from Punjab to call the shots for the party in the state.
5. **Dilemma over river waters (SYL):** As discussed in detail in an earlier section the farming community represents one of the largest sections of the population of Punjab. Given the fast depleting water table of the state, availability of water for irrigation purposes is one of the most sensitive issue for the community. Both the Congress and SAD had forcefully cleared their stand of not sharing water with any other state by constructing the SYL canal, but AAP could not come out clear regarding its views on the whole issue of water sharing. This inability to do so caused damage to the party image as far as the farming community was concerned.
6. **Controversies surrounding the party leaders:** There were continuous allegations against leaders of bungling of funds and sale of assembly tickets by ignoring the genuine contenders. The state convener of the party was even removed from the post and eventually from the party following a sting operation accepting money. Bhagwant Maan, one of the aspirants for the post of the Chief Minister and the star campaigner of the party was involved in a number of unseemly controversies such as video recording of the Parliament premises. On a number of occasions he was accused of being alcoholic, to the extent his party colleagues in Parliament requested change of their seat due to his alcoholism. The team of Delhi leaders was accused for improper behaviour with women workers too. The opposition parties attacked the party on all these counts.

Conclusions

An overall assessment of these elections results shows that Punjab once again has maintained the tradition of being unaffected by the national political trends. Hence it yet again proves that Punjab in itself is a different political space. In the recently concluded elections the BJP led NDA has formed government in all the states that went to elections in 2017 except in Punjab. The BJP achieved landslide victories in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand and managed to form coalition governments in Manipur and Goa too. Punjab is the only state in which the BJP performed miserably, and the national trend has been reversed. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections too, when the entire nation was swept by the Narendra Modi wave, the BJP won only two seats in Punjab. Hence it can be implied that Punjab in itself is an independent political sphere which remains unaffected by the national political scene.

Although the contest seemed to be triangular at the time of campaigning in the state, however, the election results have presented a totally contrasting picture of the situation. Congress emerged as the strongest party with 77 of its candidates winning and 29 of its candidates stood second in the contest. The SAD-BJP alliance which emerged winner in 18 seats, its candidates stood second in 62 constituencies while AAP which won 20 seats stood second at just 26 constituencies. Hence from these figures we can conclude that although AAP has managed a second position in terms of assembly seats in Punjab but the real competition, if any, was between Congress and SAD in majority of the assembly constituencies.

As far as the context of 'vote for change', on which the euphoria of youth was centred, is concerned, the poll results show that whilst voters were in a mood for change, they were not ready for any experimentation. Frustration and deep-rooted disenchantment with the political system still exists, but the clear underlying message was that the Punjabi voter is not ready to jump on any bandwagon unless and until there is a credible alternative.

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