

The 2017 Assembly Elections in Punjab: Emergence of a Triangular Electoral System

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This paper focuses on the 2017 assembly elections by positioning it in the electoral history of the state and providing a comparative perspective. The paper is structured broadly into three parts. The first part looks for commonalities that were visible in this particular election, making it seem as if it was just another election, conforming to state-specific long-term electoral trends. This part also dwells upon features that marked the 'exceptionality' of this particular election and asks whether it can be considered a 'watershed/game changing' election. In the second part, focus shifts to the electoral performances of the three winnable parties, namely the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) (in alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Congress Party, whilst also drawing attention to past assembly elections, especially the ones that were held after return to 'normalcy' beginning with the 1997 elections. In the process, attempt is made to present empirical details, using CSDS-NES post-poll survey data, on the main electoral issues and campaign strategies, political leadership, voting patterns and election outcome compared with earlier elections in the post-reorganization Punjab. The third part of the paper takes up a set of critical questions relating to the long-term future of Punjab politics. The paper concludes that this was arguably the most interesting election since the state's return to 'normalcy' and the result may, in some ways; turn out to be a game-changer in the long-term.

Pertinent Research Questions

The paper takes up the following four sets of research questions with focus on 2017 elections that have both long-term as well as short-term implications for the state and looks for possible answers to some of them.

(1) The first set of the questions are about considering the commonalities and exceptionality that were visible in this election and asking whether it was an 'unusual' election or a routine 'normal' one in recent Punjab.

(2) The second set of the questions relate to the electoral outcome of the 2017 elections: Can one argue that the heightened level of electoral contestation, with entry of a new winnable party in a hitherto well-established bipolar electoral system, would lead to a stable triangular electoral system in the state? If that were the case, would this indicate a long-term shift in the nature of the state's party system and traditional voting pattern? If that were not the case, can this election be considered just another 'one-episode election', hardly having any impact over the long term in a state where the Congress and the SAD have had a fairly consistent social support base? More specifically, would the AAP continue to be a winnable/relevant party in the state or would it simply wither

away like other minor parties? Can a prognosis based on this one particular electoral verdict be made about the future electoral reconfigurations and realignments? Did this particular election offer greater economic and political choices to the electorate? Lastly, to what extent would the electoral outcome of this election have a real impact on formulating and implementing public policies and service delivery, leaving aside the populist schemes promised routinely on the eve of every election, especially given that the state has faced severe social and economic challenges for quite some time now?

(3) The third set of questions relate to the social basis of political power in the state: why has the state, despite, experiencing a heightened level of electoral participation by numerically strong marginal social categories in successive elections, not experienced any significant shift in the social power structures or in the patterns of leadership within the parties, especially given that most of the other states in India have experienced an assertion from below? How can one explain the near extinction of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), an 'ethnic party', despite almost one third of the state's population belonging to Scheduled Castes? Why have the entrenched political elites and political families, belonging mainly to the dominant Jat Sikh community, within both SAD and Congress, have not been sufficiently challenged?

(4) The fourth set of the questions relate to the inroads social media has made into the political process. Was it just hype or was there substance in the popular perception of growing role of social media during campaigning and did this media make an electoral impact? This question becomes particularly relevant in the context of the emergence of youth as a new voting community with distinct electoral choices. How do we explain the hold of AAP over youth of the state and why did this not get reflected in their voting choices, going by the CSDS-NES post-poll survey data?¹

As seems obvious from the nature of these questions, possible answers to them would be in the nature of making a long-term prognosis about electoral politics of the state. And this would require taking into consideration elections held in recent decades.

Was the 2017 Punjab Assembly Election Just Another Election?

Our argument is that in some ways, the 2017 Punjab assembly election was just another election for the state as it exhibited many long-established trends, specific to the state. First, the election witnessed continued presence and importance of the three historical-cultural-geographical regions, long turned into distinct electoral regions - *Malwa*, *Doaba* and *Majha* - each having its own number of seats, region-specific electoral issues and voting patterns over many decades.² Considering the electoral importance of the three regions, regional distribution of seats and changes in distribution over the last three assembly elections underlines the importance of Malwa over other two regions namely Doaba and Majha. The fourth delimitation exercise led to an increase of four seats falling within Malwa region which now has 69 seats whereas Majha with 25 seats and Doaba with 23 seats both lost two seats each. As the discussion

below demonstrates, this election proved no exception to earlier trends if we consider electoral choices and outcomes.³

The second continuity visible in this election was that the electoral campaign was dominated by issues related to development and governance - not the ethnic issues of Punjab's troubled past as was the case during the 1997 elections. As such, this election once again confirmed the major shift in Punjab's electoral politics that has happened over the last two decades. Secular core issues of governance and development figured prominently during the campaign as well as in the manifestos of the SAD and other mainstream parties in the fray, even though not much had actually happened at ground level despite all the rhetoric. The decline of ethnic/radical mode of politics is evident in the fact that parties like SAD (Amritsar) and Dal Khalsa have long ceased to have any electoral impact whatsoever in state politics.

Third, like earlier elections going back to the sixties and seventies, 2017 elections also witnessed a very high level of electoral participation at 75 per cent, and as usual, higher than the national average.⁴ In keeping with the previous pattern, especially in elections held after the 1997 elections, participation of women was also exceptionally high, when compared with the national average.

Fourth, on the flip side, competitive populism and patronage based on clientelistic rather than programmatic or ideology based politics, also continued unabated with all the parties making tall promises which, given the precarious condition of the state's economy, remain difficult if not impossible to realize.⁵

The 'Exceptionality' Factor

Significantly, however, there were few important deviations too from the past, marking the 2017 Assembly election as 'unusual', if not a watershed election.⁶ First, the results marked the end of a long-standing bipolar electoral system with the emergence of AAP as the principal opposition party, leaving behind the SAD. While the Congress won the elections, by winning 77 seats with 38.5 percent of the votes polled, SAD won only 15 seats with 25.2 percent of the votes polled while the BJP, its ally, managed to win merely three seats with 5.4 percent of the vote polled, it was the AAP that emerged as the second largest party with 20 seats and 23.7 percent of the votes polled. Its ally, the Lok Insaaf party won two seats from the five seats it contested, polling 1.2 percent of the votes. The BSP merely got 1.5 percent of the vote despite contesting from all the seats. The CPI, another party in a state of terminal decline, polled merely 0.2 percent of the votes polled. Table 1 helps in making comparison of the 2017 election outcome with the outcomes of the earlier three elections held in the state for the assembly.

Table 1: Performance of Political Parties from 1997-2012: Assembly Elections in Punjab

Party Name	Year of Assembly Elections											
	1997			2002			2007			2012		
	Seats Contested	Won	Votes Polled	Seats Contested	Won	Votes Polled	Seats Contested	won	Votes Polled	Seats Contested	Won	Votes Polled
BJP	22	18	8.33%	23	3	5.67%	23	19	8.28%	23	12	7.18%
INC	105	14	26.59%	105	62	35.81%	116	44	40.90%	117	46	40.9%
BSP	67	1	7.48%	100	0	5.69%	115	0	4.13%	117	0	4.29%
CPI	15	2	2.98%	11	2	2.15%	25	0	0.76%	14	0	0.82%
SAD	92	75	37.64%	92	41	31.08%	93	48	37.09%	94	56	34.73%
IND	244	6	10.87%	274	9	11.27%	431	5	6.82%	418	3	6.75%
PPP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	87	0	5.04%

Source: CSDS Data

As table 1 reveals, there has been an absence of any third winnable party for a long time in the state. The Punjab electorate was forced to choose between the Congress and the SAD, both of whom, when in power, may have disappointed them given the way both society and economy have faced crises over the last two decades, even after cessation of militancy. This election provided them with a credible third alternative to look for. With the state reeling under economic deceleration and mis-governance, it was easy for the AAP leadership to blame the SAD-BJP as well as the Congress, just as they had done successfully during the 2014 general election. The AAP's remarkable electoral journey in the state commenced with the 2014 Lok Sabha election when, as a debutant, it had surprised everybody by polling 24.4 per cent of the vote and winning four out

of 13 constituencies, and finishing third in eight constituencies (in 34 of the 117 Assembly segments in the state's 13 Lok Sabha seats). The AAP success defied conventional electoral wisdom, as it was a 'new' party pitted against two well-entrenched parties having a history of hundred years or so and in a state where religion and caste factors played crucial roles in varying degrees in determining electoral outcomes in successive elections. The SAD and the Congress, the two parties having such a long electoral career have obviously been past-masters of the electoral game.

Academic literature on parties, party leadership and elections tells us that if a party is to survive electorally in a democracy, it not only needs to have a strong organizational structure, an ideology and definitive positioning on social and economic issues and a core social constituency often based on a primordial identity. Furthermore, in a state like Punjab with its strong regional identity, a party also needs to have a credible state level leadership. The AAP was handicapped on all these counts and was considered by poll pundits as being prone to more electoral failures than successes, wherever it contested in India and more so in Punjab. In fact, the party drew blank from more than four hundred seats it contested all over India, including Delhi and neighboring Haryana where it had high hopes.⁷ Thus the party's success in the 2014 election was viewed as an aberration, more so because soon after its impressive debut it seemed poised for a free-fall. Despite initial setbacks, with the party suffering from dissidence, expulsions and allegations against the state party's unit leaders sent from Delhi, it has been able to have a sizeable electoral presence. By winning 20 seats⁸ and polling 23.7 percent of the votes in 2017 elections, the party has arguably emerged as a game-changer by effecting a transition from a bipolar to a triangular electoral system.

Second, in the past the SAD was always setting the political agenda of *Punjabi Suba* after the 1966 re-organization, whether in power or not. However, as the state geared up for the 2017 election, the AAP emerged as the clear game changer by setting the agenda, identifying and defining important issues like corruption⁹ and drugs that dominated the campaign. The party issued separate manifestos targeting distinct social and economic electoral categories, trying to turn them into voting communities, facilitating direct involvement of the party's volunteers in selecting party candidates, insisting on a thorough background check on candidates seeking tickets and making creative use of social media, among other activities. The other two older parties adopted many components of the party's manifesto and campaign strategies, especially the Congress whose chief campaigner and the chief ministerial candidate Captain Amrinder Singh, launched *Halqe Wich Captain*, moving from one part of Punjab to another. Both the SAD and the Congress remained active on the social media front as the state witnessed unprecedented parallel campaigning on social media.

Third, the 2017 elections also witnessed another new development in the electoral politics of the state in the form of emergence of a new voting community, namely youth, although this was more visible during the campaign than in terms of actual voting. As per the data provided by the office of the Chief State Electoral Officer of Punjab, 53 per cent of voters fell in the age group of

18-39. More crucially, out of 1,99,63,346 eligible voters, 9,68,128 voters fall in the age group of 18-19.¹⁰ Due to a popular perception that Punjabi youth had voted for the AAP in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections,¹¹ older parties this time also took note of the youth and started treating them as a distinct voting category. Evidence of this could be seen in their manifestos as well as their campaign strategies. The Congress Manifesto promised at least one job to every household (55 lakh) in the state, a stipend of Rs 2,500 for the jobless, an end to the drug menace within four weeks of coming to power, and one-lakh taxis/commercial vehicles every year for unemployed youth.¹² The BJP¹³ and SAD in their separate but uncannily similar manifestos also promised 10 lakh jobs over five years, free laptops and free higher education for girls. To address the youth aversion for corruption, SAD even pledged to appoint a Lokayukta, if voted to power for a historic third time.¹⁴ AAP, however, managed to trump its rivals by coming out with a separate youth manifesto. The party made elaborate promises to the youth like 25 lakh new jobs in five years, entrepreneurial/skill centers, end to favoritism in public sector employment, improved schooling, special laws to give life terms to drug traffickers, end to corruption/crony capitalism and appointment of a Jan Lokpal on the Delhi model.¹⁵ Then, again taking a leaf out of the AAP book, campaigns of different parties also showed a sense of urgency to connect to the youth. While all the three parties promised better internet connectivity, the Congress trumped by promising 50 lakh smart phones to youth who participated in its 'Captain Smart Connect' campaign. Captain also launched 'Coffee with Captain' (and not Punjabi *Lassi*) mainly to connect with the urban youth in small gatherings across the state. The Congress high command's policy of 'one family one ticket' was also aimed at the youth who abhorred nepotism and also to negate the charge of nepotism against it by AAP. Sukhbir Badal, the SAD president had launched 'Youth for Punjab' campaign to make the youth aware of the development work done by the government in the past decade by the SAD-BJP government. All these parties used the social media extensively to connect to the tech-savvy youth but here too the AAP had the edge during the 2017 campaign.

Fourth, in terms of leadership the election was also an aberration because for the first time in Punjab electoral history, Arvind Kejriwal, a non-Punjabi speaking Hindu from the neighboring state of Haryana with which the state has had a running feud linked to water and territory issues, emerged as the sole face of the AAP campaign and seemed to cause a scare to stalwarts like Prakash Singh Badal and Amarinder Singh, both having a political inning for more than fifty years and enjoying state-wide support base across the three electoral regions of the state. Significantly, in run-up to the elections, a clear message was given by the AAP leadership, including Manish Sisodia, the Delhi Deputy Chief Minister, that in case of the party's victory, the state government was going to act at the behest of Kejriwal. The Kejriwal factor ultimately did not work in favor of the AAP but it was quite unprecedented in the state's electoral history.

Fifth, the 2017 election also witnessed a significant shift in the traditional social support base of the parties, especially in case of the SAD, a *panthic* party. The SAD always managed to gain the decent support of its core social

constituency of rural voters, especially the Jat Sikh landed peasantry, even when it did not do well in the election, going by the CSDS-NES poll data. The party, this time, faced an alienated rural constituency on account of repeated crops failures, followed by inadequate and erratic compensation to aggrieved farmers, spurious pesticides being distributed by the government, a flawed crop procurement process adopted by government agencies, farmers' suicides and the issue of minimum support prices. Most significantly, the inability of the SAD-BJP coalition government to capture the culprits responsible for the repeated desecration of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in different parts of the state in the months preceding the elections, alienated the party's panthic voting constituency. The attempt to enlist the *Dera Sacha Sauda* support just before the election was another development that profoundly annoyed the rural Sikh constituency because the Dera Guru was not only facing serious criminal charges but way back in 2007, was accused of impersonating the revered tenth Sikh, Guru Gobind Singh. That a self-proclaimed 'panthic party' leadership would be seeking the support of supposedly an 'anti-Sikh' institution showed conclusively the transition of the party into a 'mainstream' electoral party seeking to maximize its vote, especially that of the lower social classes that flock to the Deras.

The Electoral Verdict

Let us now discuss the 2017 electoral verdict in terms of votes polled and seats won in the assembly election including this election, focusing mainly on the three main parties, namely the SAD (and BJP), the Congress and the AAP. The Congress made a significant advance in all the three regions of the state winning 31 more seats compared to 2012 whereas its main rival, SAD lost 41 seats. BJP also lost 9 seats compared to the earlier election. The Congress in 2017 won 15, 22, 40 seats in Doaba, Majha and Malwa respectively as against 6, 8 and 32 in 2012 whereas the relative figures for SAD was 5, 2 and 8 respectively as against 11, 12 and 33 seats won respectively in 2012 and its ally BJP won one seat each from the three regions whereas it had won 5, 5 and 2 respectively in 2012. The debutant AAP got two seats in Doaba region and rest of its 18 seats came from the Malwa region. Its ally Lok Insaf Party also won 2 seats from Malwa region.

The 2017 election saw a drastic reduction in the vote share of independent candidates, although in the 2012 they had managed to win 3 seats with a vote share of 6.75 per cent. It is worth pointing out that of three Independent winning candidates, two candidates were the rebel candidates belonging to the SAD. But in the 2017 election, Independents only secured 2.33 per cent vote share without winning any seat. Except the Congress, SAD, BJP and the AAP, other parties in the fray, could not even secure two percent of the votes polled leading to the emergence of a triangular electoral system. As mentioned above, the BSP is continually in decline in Punjab and this time it just managed to secure a 1.59 percent vote share. The independent candidates were also big losers in the elections.

Thinking of the margin of victories and losses, the Congress lost 14 seats by only narrow margins in the 2012 election whereas in 2017 its tally of seats lost by a narrow margin was reduced to only four seats. This showed the strenuous efforts of the Congress leadership to deal with the rebel factor and credit for this must go to Captain Amarinder Singh as he introduced the 'one family one seat' system that helped in keeping dissidence within the party in check. The AAP also lost 4 seats by a narrow margin. This time, the total seats lost only by a narrow margin were reduced to 11 compared with 17 in the 2012 election.

How do we explain SAD's dismal performance with the party recording lowest number of seats since the reorganization of the state?¹⁶ Winning for the third consecutive time was never going to be easy for the SAD-BJP combine in a state where only once before (the 2012 election) the incumbent party was able to retain power. However, to lose so badly after all these years, with the percentage of votes polled in favour of SAD in the 2017 elections considerably reduced, needs to be explained further. The CSDS-NES survey data shows that the party lost the support of its core social constituency (Jat Sikh peasantry) in a significant way. Besides the reasons stated above, the foremost reason for the Akali overall loss of vote was due to inability of the party regime to stem the economic decline in the post-green revolution period. Beside the problems in the agricultural sector, even the once famed manufacturing sector of the state, namely the sports goods, woolen, hosiery, cycle, tractor and small machine parts sectors, suffered decline. On the governance front too, the SAD-BJP regime failed badly with evidence of rampant crime and corruption involving politicians from the ruling elites and working in league with the heavily compromised and politicized police. During the past decade, Punjab witnessed unprecedented level of mafia style corruption - whether it related to sand, transport, cable or liquor - with all flourishing under the politician-bureaucracy nexus. Even the Badal family's vast business concerns, ranging from transport to cable to hospitality, came under opposition scrutiny. However, what most damaged SAD's credibility was the government's inability to check the rampant drug trade, which had ruined the lives of thousands of youth in the state. Given the high cost of synthetic drugs, which became viral fairly recently, it was basically only youth from the landed peasantry class who could afford them and they belonged mostly to the Jat Sikh peasantry, the traditional vote bank of the SAD. In fact, despite all the denials of being complicit in the trade and blaming the Border Security Force for not checking or stopping smuggling from across the border or neighboring states and also not carrying out arrests, the Akali leadership could not shrug off the taint. The SAD Jat Sikh leadership was thus blamed for ruining its 'own children' in its greed given that only the children of mostly Sikh Jat landed peasantry could afford to pay the high price of synthetic drugs.¹⁷

To a question related to the drug menace, a staggering 58.7 percent of the respondents interviewed in the CSDS-NES survey contended that SAD led coalition government failed in curbing the drug menace. Respondents in fact showed stronger faith in the Congress Party and as many as 30.8 per cent of respondents believed that Congress was the best bet to control the drug

menace.¹⁸ The respondents' answers also revealed that they were not impressed with the overall performance of the coalition government. When asked whether the SAD-BJP government in Punjab should be given another chance to be in power, 61.7 percent of respondents answered in the negative.

There have also been long-term factors responsible for the endemic decline of SAD over the past years. Post-1997 Punjab has witnessed the rise of person-centric leadership within the SAD as Badal senior and his close relatives have exercised control over both party and government, while the autonomy of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) and Akal Takht has been badly eroded. In people's perception, the SGPC has become a source of funding for the party, with huge donations coming from gurdwaras under its control. The Akal Takht's moral authority over Sikhs has been badly damaged and both institutions are popularly perceived as instruments of SAD leadership and are used for settling scores with political opponents. Sadly, once a cadre-based and ideologically driven movement, SAD itself has now been reduced to a 'family party', following the tradition of most other distinctive state-level parties. The SAD has also been 'mainstreamed' in national politics as the party has been toning down its regionalist and panthic agenda.

Arguably, decline of the ethnic agenda over the years has worked to the disadvantage of the SAD. Among the post-Bluestar generations of voters and Akali leadership, there is little memory of the gruesome events in Punjab during the militancy period. The older Akali leadership realizes that resorting to panthic politics, although core Anandpur Sahib Resolution demands remains largely unfulfilled, would be suicidal for all the stakeholders. Thus, decline of the SAD in organizational terms and its inability to raise panthic issues have both meant that the party is no longer sure of its traditional panthic support base as it looks to broaden its support base. This has helped a party like the AAP which has kept mostly away from ethnic issues, instead focusing and presenting itself as a pragmatic party concerned with clean politics, governance and development.

Whither the BJP?

The SAD's defeat was also due to the dismal performance of the BJP. The Punjab unit of BJP gets to contest 23 out of the 117 seats in the state. However, the 2017 election saw it as an ineffective junior ally, a party that is in a state of decline both in terms of its support base and its inability to project any single leader with credible support and recognition across the state. This comes as a surprise as the BJP has always gained whenever it has entered into an electoral alliance with a state party, be it in Maharashtra, Karnataka, West Bengal, Odisha or neighboring Haryana.¹⁹ The BJP gains and losses, in terms of seats or votes, in recent elections has been attributed to its alliance with the SAD. Thus the party in substance has not gained much from this electoral alliance and seems unable to benefit from its traditional urban social constituency of trading and business groups, who perceive the party as ineffective in defending their economic interests. The BJP state unit, moreover, has been forced to underplay its ideological thrust, potentially further alienating its core supporters, while the

SAD has largely managed to retain its panthic support base. Conscious of a possible future break-up of this alliance, and given SAD's natural desire to emerge as a single majority party in the state, there have been consistent SAD efforts to expand its support base, especially since Sukhbir Singh Badal's ascendancy as the president of the party. As a result, the party no longer seems capable of helping the SAD especially with its disgruntled state level leadership and traditional voters comprising of urban trading and business classes. Since the alliance no longer seems mutually complementary and therefore electorally beneficial, as was the case earlier, at time of alliance's inception with the SAD having rural Sikh support base and the BJP having significant urban upper caste support base. There is a distinct possibility of a breakup. In fact, the state unit of the BJP, going by recent media reports, was contemplating to go its separate way in the wake of 2014 results but the high command vetoed it, fearing that the breakup would help rival Congress and also allowing the Akalis to revive the panthic agenda, creating trouble in the sensitive state.

The Congress Victory

The unprecedented Congress victory, which gave a lifeline to the party that has been on a losing streak, cannot be attributed only to the anti-incumbency vote against the SAD-BJP rule.²⁰ There are many established factors that went in favor of the party. An important factor that has always acted in party's favor is its decent support base both among the Hindu and Sikh electorates cutting across castes and regions. This has allowed the party to contest on its own, though in the past it has had pre-electoral alliance with the Left parties, in fact as late as in the 1997 and 2002 assembly elections. The SAD and BJP (Jan Sangh in its earlier avatar), on the other hand, have had a limited spatial/community support base and that is why both parties have always looked for an electoral alliance.²¹ If we look at the performance of various political parties in the recent elections whether to Punjab assembly or Lok Sabha, it is noticeable that the percentage of votes polled in favor of the Congress party is always higher than the SAD except for the 1997 elections. SAD has always benefitted from its alliance with BJP (especially in 2007 and 2012), despite the Congress Party gaining a higher percentage of votes than it. Table 1 provides all the relevant data.

The Congress victory has to be attributed to the leadership of Captain Amarinder Singh, who with more than five decades of public life continues to have a state-wide support base and also enjoys the reputation of being a strong leader who can stand up to the party high command for the cause of the state, as was seen in the case of his unequivocal stand on the SYL issue.²² The Captain's personal popularity was evident in the CSDS post-poll survey too. As per the CSDS-NES' 2017 survey, to a question on preference for the next chief minister for the state, a maximum of 29 per cent voted for the Captain whereas only 20 per cent voted for incumbent chief minister Prakash Singh Badal. Arvind Kejriwal, the face of the AAP campaign, was chosen by only 6 per cent of the respondents, showing clearly that the electorate wanted a Punjabi as the Chief Minister of the state. In response to another question on the best party for

development of Punjab, 32.6 per cent respondents gave their preference for Congress. The SAD was recommended by 23.3 per cent, AAP received 20.1 per cent of the votes, whereas BJP got the support of only 3 per cent of the respondents.

The failure of the AAP to put up any chief ministerial candidate may be viewed as being important in this context, as the party did not project any leader who could take on the Captain or Badal senior. The Congress win may also be viewed as a preference by the electorate to settle for continuity and change, a Congress win ensured continuity but also change as this would get rid of the corrupted SAD-BJP regime. On the other hand, the AAP regime would have an element of uncertainty.

Will the AAP Survive?

As stated above, the most significant development of 2017 elections was the emergence of a third party AAP in the political environment of Punjab. As mentioned above, although AAP contested in 112 seats and was successful in winning only 20 seats, it managed to capture 23.7 percent of the total votes polled, compared with 24 percent of the votes it gained in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, a really remarkable performance for a debutant party. The question being asked increasingly now is whether a four-year-old party, after a disappointing electoral result, will be able to survive and bring about a long-term critical shift in the bipolar party system. This question has become pertinent after AAP's defeats not only in Punjab but also in Goa, followed by the party's disastrous performance in Municipal elections in Delhi, where only two years earlier the party had such a colossal win. Then, there are credible media reports about the party facing internal dissension both in Delhi and also in Punjab, the only other state where party has significant electoral presence. It is pertinent to ask whether the obituaries being written and postmortems being conducted are not a little hasty. And even if these doomsters are on the mark, is their grim prognosis referring merely to the impending fate of the party in the electoral arena? Or are they actually also predicting an end to the seductive promise of 'alternative politics' that was in the air with the AAP entering into electoral arena soon after Anna Hazare-led 'India against corruption movement' (IAC)? Sifting through these prognostic obituaries and post mortems in the social media, one finds both strands of thought.

As for the first, electoral defeats, even if bad ones and in succession, are never sufficient causes for the destruction of a party, even if it is a nascent party like the AAP. Though in case of the AAP, it has not been such a bad defeat, because in both the Punjab and Delhi, the party came second, leaving behind the two well-entrenched parties, that is, SAD and Congress respectively. In any case, pessimism about the long-term electoral fate of the AAP has always been there, given that each one of its few electoral successes whether in Punjab or in Delhi, have been considered aberrations and for good reasons, as discussed above. So electorally yes, prognosis does not remain good as the party on the ground does not seem to be in a self-correction mode. What about the promise

of an alternative mode of politics the party has brought to the table? Is the idea or promise also dead, given the electoral reverses and rampant dissension within the state unit of the party?

That AAP as an 'original' party representing some form of an alternative lies in its 'exceptionalism'.²³ First, AAP owes its inception to a movement and protest, a rarity for recent politics in India. Second, AAP, unlike other 'new' parties that cropped up in the state, such as Punjab Peoples Party or Lok Bhalai Party, is neither the result of a split from an existing party nor was it set up by an ambitious leader leaving his larger party and more often than not, hailing from a powerful community. Third, the AAP also stands apart from the others for its conscious attempt to reach out to larger electorates, cutting across long-established patterns of partisan alignments and existing social cleavages in the state. The party succeeded in receiving overwhelming support in the state, although not enough votes, by raising voices against corruption in high places as well as spread of the drug menace, setting them up as the major electoral issues during the campaign and forcing other parties to respond. Fourth, despite its limited electoral success, AAP's entry into Punjab politics rearranged the arena, changed the contest and electoral strategies. The party left its imprint on the politics of the state by raising the issue of drugs, farmers' suicides, corruption, dynastic politics, nepotism and rampant misuse of public money under the VIP culture in the state. As per the 2014 survey, to the question which party raised most important issues, 20.9 per cent of the respondents said that AAP had raised the most important issues. The 2017 survey also revealed the voters conceding that AAP raised the most critical issues. The rival parties were forced to take counter-strategic measures to contain the AAP effect during the campaign itself.²⁴ The newly-formed Congress government, in its first orders, decided to do away with the 'red beacon culture' and has also emphasized austerity, unheard of in the political culture of Punjab which has usually been based on 'pomp and show', even when the economy was nose diving.

Reading the CSDS-NES Post-Poll Survey Data²⁵

Significantly, in a CSDS-NES post-poll survey held after the 2014 election, 40 per cent of young respondents in the 18-35 age group had reported voting for the AAP. That survey also revealed that youth credited AAP more than they credited any other party for raising their critical concerns, such as drug abuse, mafia style corruption, unemployment and widespread use of coercion by those in power. One possible reason for the overwhelming youth support might have been the fact that youth suffered the most from the agrarian crisis and flight of industries that have led to massive unemployment and lack of other opportunities. The CSDS post-poll survey data from the last three assembly elections shows that the Congress party has remained popular among all age groups almost equally, including the state youth. On the other hand, SAD and BJP in this election faced considerable loss in their support base especially among younger and middle aged electorate groups. When we look at the support base of AAP in the state, it is interesting that it remained popular among the

younger and middle aged voters. Moving to the gender perspective, it is worth noting that AAP was more popular among males than females. The Congress party was more acceptable to women voters in the 2007 elections but has faced a decline in its women support base since then. Whereas in case of BJP and SAD, there is no such gender disparity.

Another important aspect is the support base among the educated which no party can afford to ignore. The most interesting fact in this regard is the majority support from the educated for AAP. This comprised of voters with higher education, followed by relatively lesser qualified but literate electors. On the other hand, BJP and SAD faced a big loss of support from the educated electorate in the 2017 election. Even the Congress suffered a decline in terms of the support from educated voters.

If we consider the caste-community factor in recent elections, it is apparent that the Congress Party faced a lack of support from OBC Hindus and Dalit Hindu voters and among OBC Sikhs. But more significant was the fact that SAD suffered a great loss from its traditional support base among Jat Sikhs, Khatri Sikhs and upper caste Hindus as well. On the other hand, Jat and Dalit Sikhs were the major supporters of the AAP followed by Hindus.

Distribution of data on the basis of locality depicts that the Congress party suffered a small loss of support among the rural electorate, whereas its support base in urban areas widened. Looking at the same perspective, SAD suffered a greater loss in its support from the urban electorate in previous elections although it also faced a loss in its rural support base. On the other hand, AAP was found to be more popular among the urban electorate than the rural one.

Last but not the least the CSDS post-poll survey data focuses on the social base of political parties on the basis of economic class. The AAP was acceptable among two extreme set of voters i.e. the poor and the upper classes. Although it was also popular among lower and middle class voters, the Congress Party, which is known as a pro-poor party, has faced a decline in its base among poor and lower strata. However its popularity has increased among the middle and upper economic sections in recent elections. The BJP support base has been reduced amongst all the economic sections. This was also the case with the SAD, except that it acquired some gains among the poor sections.

Some Conclusions

Arguably, the emergence of the AAP as the third winnable or relevant party has also coincided with the emergence of a triangular electoral system. As previous election results in Punjab have shown, besides the Congress, SAD (with BJP as its junior ally) and AAP, none of the other opposition parties seemed to have any electoral impact whatsoever. In fact, this has been the case for quite some time if one considers the low percentage of the votes polled by them in past Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections. There is valid skepticism about the ability of AAP to fulfill its ambition of emerging as a 'national third force' considering its inherent structural weaknesses and leadership crisis, but the party has definitely emerged as a credible third force in Punjab. Arguably, the party's

success has weakened the impact of traditional social cleavages on election results in the state, although one may have to wait for further affirmation. As for the future, much will depend on whether the state unit of the party comes under the control of senior leadership of the state, or whether the Delhi based leadership continues its undue interference, especially during the electoral process. Lack of control by local leadership has been perceived as a major factor for the party's dismal performance. The recent granting of greater autonomy to the state unit vis-à-vis the Delhi leadership provides a good omen for the party's future in the state. The four-year old party, while continuing to give the 'issue of corruption a new salience in electoral politics and using that as the basis for political mobilization',²⁶ like it has done in the whole of India and wherever it has contested, is a major advancement from the past. It has also shown ability to take up the state specific issues, forcing rival parties to respond. This also seems a good omen for the party's future in the state. Finally, emergence of AAP is also good for the state in the long-term as the Congress Party currently in power has been aware of the impending challenge and has in fact made efforts to address some of the issues raised by the AAP.

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Notes

¹ The National Election Study (NES) is a comprehensive social scientific study of India elections and continues the series that begun in 1967 by Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and after a gap was revived in 1996. The essay uses the NES 2014 post-poll data. A team of academics teaching in the colleges and universities from all over India were involved in the exercise and the study was coordinated by Lokniti Programme for Comparative Democracy at the CSDS, Delhi.

² Ashutosh Kumar (2012), 'Just another Election?' *Seminar*, 63, March 2012, p. 74.

³ The AAP in fact concentrated its campaign in the Malwa region hoping to replicate its victory in 70 seats Delhi assembly elections in 2015. Arguably, it was a tactical blunder.

⁴1992 assembly election was exceptional in this regard as the SAD had boycotted the elections and the elections was contested under the shadow of militancy. There was a call to boycott the elections by the hardliners as well as by the militants.

⁵ At the time of writing Captain Amarinder Singh led Congress government was finding it difficult to waive off farmers loans as was promised by the party in its manifesto. There are many other promises which are going to remain unfulfilled given the financial state of the economy.

⁶ Ashutosh Kumar, 'It is anybody's Game in Punjab', *The Mint*, 31 January 2017. <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/J9WkH82vJwoweFSOuiJQoO/Its-anybodys-game-in-Punjab.html>

⁷ Frequent reference about characteristic of Punjabi audacity to differ with the Indian mainstream was made in everyday discussion at that time.

⁸ The AAP ally Lok Bhalai Party won two seats in Malwa region.

⁹ Ashutosh Kumar, 'Corruption, nepotism led to Akali Dal's rout in Punjab', *The New Indian Express*, 12 March, 2017
<http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2017/mar/12/corruption-nepotism-led-to-akali-dals-rout-in-punjab-1580545--1.htm>

¹⁰ Ashutosh Kumar, 'The Youth Turn', *The Week*, February 5, 2017.
<http://www.theweek.in/columns/guest-columns/the-youth-turn.html>

¹¹ It was clearly visible in the CSDS-NES 2014 data.

¹² *The Tribune*, 10 January 2017. <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab-assembly-election-2017/punjab-congress-manifesto-2017-will-end-drug-trade-in-month-cong/348413.html>

¹³ *The Tribune*, 22 January 2017. <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab-assembly-election-2017/punjab-polls-2017-bjp-woos-punjab-poor-with-ghee-sugar/353755.html>

¹⁴ *The Tribune*, 23 January 2017.
<http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/politics/sukhbir-badal-announces-15-point-sad-manifesto/354186.html>

¹⁵ *The Tribune*, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab-assembly-election-2017/punjab-polls-2017-aap-s-youth-manifesto/324514.html>

¹⁶ Ashutosh Kumar, 'Election results: 5 reasons why SAD was crushed in Punjab elections', *The Hindustan Times*, 12 March, 2017'
<http://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/5-reasons-why-sad-was-crushed-in-punjab-elections/story-e11JwWMbftVZGgNmTicnLO.html>

¹⁷ The first author heard about such sentiment being expressed during an interaction with the students and faculty at Khalsa College, Amritsar months before elections took place.

¹⁸ Congress, in its manifesto and also during Captain's speeches, had promised to bring an end to drug menace within a month of coming to power.

¹⁹ Ashutosh Kumar, 'whither BJP in Punjab', *Deccan Herald*, 18 March, 2017.
<http://www.deccanherald.com/content/601905/whither-bjp-punjab.html>

²⁰ Ashutosh Kumar, 'The Congress's Punjab Lifeline', *The Hindu*. March 13, 2017.

<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-congress-punjab-lifeline/article17452739.ece>

²¹ In 1996 elections SAD had an alliance with the BSP and in 1977 it contested and formed coalition government with the Janata Party (mainly erstwhile Jan Sangh members).

²² Captain had resigned as a minister from the Barnala ministry in 1986 after the Punjab police had entered into the Golden Temple. Years before he had resigned from the Congress in 1984 after Operation Blue Star despite his close relations with the Gandhi family. More recently, he resigned from his Lok Sabha in November 2016 after the ruling of the Supreme Court of India on the Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) Canal issue, which went against the interests of Punjab. As Chief Minister of the state, he had got the Punjab Termination of Water agreements Act passed unanimously by the Punjab Legislature in 2004 defying the party high command.

²³ Ashutosh Kumar, 'Is AAP's Promise of An Alternative Politics Over? *The Hindu*, 5 May, 2017.

<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/is-aaps-promise-of-an-alternative-politics-over/article18385296.ece>

²⁴ Ashutosh Kumar, 'Politics as Unusual', *Indian Express*, 30 January 2017. <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/punjab-elections-amarinder-singh-sidhu-aap-parkash-singh-badal-akali-dal-4497982/>

²⁵ The CSDS survey covered all 27 assembly constituencies covering all the three regions of the state. The post-poll survey was conducted by the students of Panjab University, Chandigarh and Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar. Ashutosh Kumar and Jagrup Singh Sekhon coordinated the survey whereas Rajvinder Singh and Hardeep Kaur acted as supervisors at Chandigarh centre.

²⁶ Andrew Wyatt (2015) 'Arvind Kejriwal Leadership of the Aam Aadmi Party', *Contemporary South Asia*, 23(2), p. 168 (167-180).