

Punjab's Post-Assembly Elections: Analysis of the Gurdaspur by-election and Municipal Elections

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The main objective of this article is to highlight that the most significant aspect of the Gurdaspur Lok Sabha by-election was the massive decline of the once resurgent Aam Admi Party (AAP) in Punjab. However, in order to capture the significance of this point, it is important to contextualize and provide explanations for the outcome of the Gurdaspur by-election, especially reasons for the spectacular decline of AAP. The short paper provides three important explanations for the outcome. The paper also offers a brief commentary on the municipal elections that followed soon after the by-election.

When studying by-elections in general, a widely shared view is that there is a sharp difference between advanced democracies and newly emerging democracies regarding the outcome and significance of a by-election. During a by-election in an advanced democratic country such as the UK, the voters normally tend to prefer the opposition over the government in order to strengthen the accountability and democratic functioning of the government.¹ In contrast with that, in newly emerging democracies such as India, the general view is that the ruling party is able to mobilize and concentrate resources in the constituency experiencing by-election in such a way that it is able to get its candidate elected. It is true that under normal circumstances, the general view about the likely outcome of a by-election in a newly emerging democracy is usually predictable true but exceptional political circumstances can lead to contrary results. As an example of such outcomes, we can cite the examples of Gidderbaha and Ajnala by-elections to the Punjab Assembly when Beant Singh-led Congress government was in power in Punjab. The resentment against the Beant Singh government for using repressive measures in the rural areas under the pretext of fighting Sikh militancy was so strong that the electorate in these two constituencies voted in the opposition Akali Dal candidates with significant majorities. In fact, these two by-election victories under Parkash Singh Badal led Akali Dal set the launching pad for an overall Akali victory during the assembly elections that followed in 1997. More recently, the victory of the Samajwadi Party candidates from two Lok Sabha by-elections in UP where the BJP government is in power provides another example of the non-applicability of the thesis that in developing democracies, by-elections are always won by the governing party. In both the Punjab and UP examples we have cited, the explanation for opposition victories is that in situations where the anti-government feelings are very strong, these can neutralize the relative advantage

of money, material resources and government machinery that a government party possesses.

The Gurdaspur by-election was not held in exceptional circumstances, so the victory of a government party fits the general trend of such a party winning the by-election. However, the significance of Gurdaspur elections is not that the opposition party there, that is, the BJP supported by SAD, lost but that it indicated the early signs of the collapse of an emerging third political force in Punjab namely AAP. In this context, three points are especially worth making regarding the Gurdaspur Lok Sabha election. We will also comment later in the paper on the municipal elections that followed soon after the Gurdaspur by-election.

One, the vote share of the Shiromani Akali Dal-Bharatiya Janata Party alliance (SAD-BJP) declined by less than 1% when compared to the 2017 assembly elections as we can see from Table 1.² In the Gurdaspur parliamentary constituency, the SAD-BJP got 36.85% votes in 2017 assembly elections and still managed to get 35.98% in the by-election. Undoubtedly, the vote share of SAD-BJP has declined when compared to its performance in 2014 general elections (46.25%). What would explain the small change in the vote share between the 2017 Assembly election and 2017 Lok Sabha by-election? Our contention is that during the by-election, the Hindu vote bank of the BJP remained intact. It is, therefore, an exaggeration to say, as was stated by almost all commentators after the by-election, that the Gurdaspur by-election was a big setback for BJP. What led to the defeat of the BJP candidate Swaran Salaria was not the decline in its Hindu vote bank but the migration of a considerable section of the Sikh vote (under Akali Dal influence in the previous elections) from BJP to the Congress candidate Sunil Jakhar.

Second, the victory of the Congress candidate (Sunil Jakhar) was not so much due to him being a Congress candidate but more due to the vote, especially Sikh vote, going in Congress's favour because of Captain Amarinder Singh. Amarinder Singh had some popular support among the Sikhs then due to his earlier positions on Operation Blue Star and Punjab river water disputes. He had resigned from the Congress party and the Parliament as a protest against Operation Blue Star in June, 1984, the Army action at the Golden Temple ordered by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It is said that Indira Gandhi had called him "an emotional fool" for taking that step while the Sikh population the world over, traumatized by that ghastly operation, had hailed Amarinder Singh's step as an assertion of dignity and collective pride of the community.

Later on, as the Chief Minister of Punjab (2002-07), he got the river water use treaties relating to Punjab, which he viewed as patently unfair to Punjab, annulled in the Punjab Legislative Assembly. Due to this action, which in Punjab was hailed as a bold step, at that time a storm had blown against him in the political and media circles in Delhi but he stood his ground. The Manmohan Singh-led UPA government was in power at the Centre. The Congress Chief Sonia Gandhi had refused to meet him for six months, as was revealed recently by Amarinder Singh himself. Due to these acts of defiance, he is respected by large sections of the Sikh population in Punjab and even outside. No other

Congress leader in Punjab has been respected in this way (Singh 2017a).³ The vote share of the Congress (INC) has increased from 33.19% (general election 2014) to 45.24% (assembly elections 2017) and 58.66% (by-election). The controversy over the character of a major SAD leader (Sucha Singh Langah) from Gurdaspur area also played a major role in the downfall of SAD influence among Sikh voters which, in turn, led to transfer of that Sikh vote away from SAD-supported BJP towards INC.

Third, the performance of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has been dismal, as the party was not able to hold its position. It got a vote share of 16.62% (general elections 2014), 9.75% (assembly elections 2017) and a miserable 2.76% in the Gurdaspur by-election. This drastic decline took place in a relatively short time span of 8 months as the assembly election took place in February 2017 and the byelection in October 2017.

In our view, more than the defeat of the BJP candidate and the victory of the Congress candidate, the significance of the Gurdaspur by-election from a Punjab wide political perspective is the total wipe out of AAP.

Table 1. Party-wise vote share (% of votes polled) in Gurdaspur parliamentary constituency

Party/Elections	General Election 2014	Assembly Election 2017	Gurdaspur By-election 2017
SAD/BJP	46.25	36.85	35.98
INC	33.20	45.24	58.66
AAP	16.62	9.75	2.76

Table 2. Party-wise number of votes polled in Gurdaspur parliamentary constituency

Party/Elections	General Election 2014	Assembly Election 2017	Gurdaspur By-election 2017
SAD/BJP	482255	418420	306533
INC	346190	513703	499752
AAP	173376	110687	23579

The AAP which had won 4 Lok Sabha seats in 2014 parliamentary elections with a wide margin and appeared to emerge as a Third Alternative political force (Singh 2017b)⁴, was the most promising party for the 2017 assembly elections. However, it was able to secure only 20 seats in the Punjab assembly elections. This was a huge disappointment to AAP supporters. However, that disappointment is nothing compared to the disaster during the result of the Gurdaspur byelection which showed AAP at its worst low position. In this article we outline three major reasons which in our opinion are responsible for this debacle.

First, the downfall of AAP in Punjab started when the AAP first removed Sucha Singh Chhotepur from the convenorship of AAP. Ouster of a person of the calibre of Chhotepur did not go well with the large number of voters in Punjab (Singh 2017b). The authenticity of the sting which was used to ouster Chhotepur is still questionable and has not been made public by AAP. Moreover, the AAP never gave any clarifications about the claim made by Chhotepur that he had collected approximately Rs. 20 lakhs from people of Punjab and deposited that with the AAP central leadership.⁵

Secondly, the same treatment was meted out to Gurpreet Singh Wariach (alias Ghuggi) who was brought in as new Convenor only a few months before assembly elections.⁶ Gurpreet Singh Wariach helped the party to secure 20 seats in the assembly elections, although far below the miracle numbers of which AAP leadership was expecting. Gurpreet Singh Wariach was removed from convenorship citing party's poor performance in the assembly elections although there was no such reason to do so as the party grew from zero assembly seats to 20. The removal of Gurpreet Singh Wariach from the party convenorship not only brought the memory of Chhotepur's dismissal to the fore, but also cemented the widely shared view of the voters that the party removes able people without valid reasons. Before Chhotepur and Ghuggi, the first convenor of the AAP in Punjab (Dr Sumail Singh Sidhu), who had a good profile as a young intellectual and social activist with a doctorate in history from JNU, had also been removed without making public the reasons behind Sidhu's exist. There was also a widespread belief that was shared with both of us by many voters in Punjab that the central leadership of AAP did not want a powerful Punjab leader to emerge who could challenge its authority.

Third and perhaps the most important reason behind AAP's downfall was that the party which always claimed that it was committed to zero tolerance on crime, corruption and character⁶ and which did not miss any chance to demand inquiries into any allegations raised against any person from other parties, did not seem to be committed to zero tolerance on corruption and character in its own home. During the party campaign for assembly elections in Punjab, there were quite a few allegations (which included mistreating women party workers and corruption in allotting party tickets) against the two party in-charges appointed to look after the Punjab campaign from the head office. However, no internal inquiry was ever held and the national Convenor of the AAP, Mr. Arvind Kejriwal, always kept quiet and never gave any statement on this issue. The silence of the national Convenor on this issue of corruption and character in his own party, who is well known for never to be silent against the three C's (crime, corruption and character) made the party very vulnerable to attacks from its political opponents. The recent nomination of one of those Punjab unit party in-charges (Sanjay Singh) to the Rajya Sabha by AAP has not gone well with the people of Punjab and has further weakened the AAP in Punjab. Further Jarnail Singh (former MLA from Delhi) who was asked to sacrifice his legislative assembly seat to unsuccessfully contest against Parkash Singh Badal was ignored by AAP for nomination for Rajya Sabha, thus denying an opportunity to a Punjabi candidate who was considered much more deserving

1.	Amritsar	Amritsar	85	64	07	06	--	08
2.	Jalandhar	Jalandhar	80	66	04	08	--	02
3.	Patiala	Patiala	60	59	---	---	---	----
		Total:	225	189	11	14	---	10

Source: Tribune, 18 December 2017

Table 4. Results of the municipal councils/nagar panchayats elections held in December 2017 in Punjab

Sr. No.	Name of District	Name of Municipal Council/ Nagar Panchayat	No. of Wards	Cong	SAD	BJP	AAP	Ind/Others
1.	Amritsar	Rajasansi	13	07	03	03	--	---
2.	Barnala	Handiaya	13	07	03	03	---	---
3.	Fatehgarh Sahib	Amlloh	13	09	02	02	---	---
4.	Ferozepur	1) Mallan Wala Khas 2) Makhu	13 13	13 13	---	---	---	---
5.	Jalandhar	1) Bhogpur 2) Shahkot 3) Goraya 4) Bilga	13 13 13 13	---	---	-- -- 01 03	---	13 01 01 06
6.	Kapurthala	1) Dhillwan 2) Begowal 3) Bholath	11 13 13	07 04 05	---	---	---	04 01 03
7.	Ludhiana	1) Machhiwara 2) Mullanpur Dakha 3) Maloud 4) Sahnewal	15 13 11 15	12 13 08 12	01 -- 01 02	01 -- 01 01	---	01 -- 01 ---
8.	Moga	1) Bagha Purana 2) Dharamkot 3) Fatehgarh Panjtoor	15 13 11	15 11 10	---	---	---	---
9.	Muktsar	Bariwala	11	09	01	--	---	01
10.	Patiala	1) Ghagga 2) Ghanaur	13 11	08 10	01 ---	02 01	---	02 ---
11.	Pathankot	Narot Jaimal Singh	11	11	---	---	---	---
12.	Sangrur	1) Dirba	13	11	---	---	---	02

		2) Cheema	13	01	--	---	---	12
		3) Khanauri	13	06	01	---	---	06
		4) Moonak	13	--	---	---	---	13
13.	Tarn Taran	Khemkaran	13	12	---	---	---	01
14.	Mansa	Bhikhi	13	06	---	---	---	07
15.	S.B.S.Nagar	Balachaur	15	---	---	---	---	15
16.	Bathinda	Talwandi Sabo	15	13	01	---	---	01
17.	Hoshiarpur	Mahilpur.	13	08	03	---	---	02
		Total:	414	267	37	15	01	94

Source: Tribune, 18 December 2017

The fact that AAP with 4 MPs (though divided into 2 factions) and being the main opposition party in the Punjab assembly with 20 MLAs managed to win only 2 wards (one in Kapurthala and one in Ludhiana) proves the point that AAP still does not have proper local level party structure, organization and leadership.

In three municipal councils/nagar panchayats i.e. Balachaur, Moonak and Bhogpur, independents won all the wards. This shows that where local level leadership exists with mass contacts, such activists can defeat government supported candidates. Government machinery is always used by a ruling party to elect as many of its candidates as it can, but the victory of such independent candidates belies the self-comforting claim made by AAP that the ruling party (INC) had used force to win the municipal election and that AAP's poor electoral performance was mainly due to this power of the ruling party. After all, the AAP had defeated the ruling Congress Party in Delhi and it was able to do so because of the very well-knit mass public contact campaign by the party.

The initial euphoria of the AAP in Punjab being over now, the future of the party looks bleak. The party's miserable performance during the Gurdaspur by-election and the municipal elections suggests two points of serious weakness of AAP. One, it does not have a clear ideology and strategy and two; it does not have the required structure/leadership base at the ground level to retain mass contact with the voters. As we were writing the concluding section of the article, the news came of the turmoil in the Punjab unit of the Aam Admi Party (AAP) in the wake of AAP supremo Kejriwal's apology to Akali leader Majithia regarding his previous allegations against the latter being involved in the drug trade in Punjab. This turmoil is a continuation of the organizational muddle of the party where the centralized leadership takes unilateral decisions without consulting the Punjab unit. The AAP in Punjab seems to be hurt beyond repair due to this over-centralized Delhi control over the party. The only ray of hope one can see is that this ruin of the AAP in Punjab might create more positive conditions for the emergence of a genuine regional party in Punjab (Singh 2018).¹⁰

Notes

- ¹ This view was shared by a number of Labour and Liberal Democrat activists Pritam Singh.
- ² The data on the party-wise number of votes polled has been taken from the website of the Election Commission of India and the vote share (%) has been calculated based on this data.
- ³ Singh, P (2017a), 'It is more than just a Congress win in Punjab', *The Tribune*, March 17. It is worth pointing out here that Amarinder Singh has lost that respect, after his controversial and needless snub shown to some Sikh members of Trudeau cabinet in Canada and especially to Harjit Singh Sajjan who occupies the post of Defence Minister in that cabinet, the highest government position a Sikh has ever acquired outside India. Sikhs in India and abroad were proud of the positions occupied by the Sikhs in the Trudeau cabinet and Amarinder Singh's stand that his stance on Sajjan and others cabinet members was due to they being supporters of Khalistan did not carry much credibility with the Sikhs. His stance was viewed as petty and personal because Amarinder Singh had been previously denied visa to visit Canada for garnering electoral support of Canadian diasporic Sikhs for him and his party before the 2017 assembly elections, and he suspected the hand of Sajjan and others in denying him that visa.
- ⁴ Singh, P (2017b) Aam Aadmi Party as Third Player in Punjab Politics, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 52, No 3, 21 January 2017 (available at <http://www.epw.in/journal/2017/3/web-exclusives/aam-aadmi-party-third-player-punjab-politics.html>).
- ⁵ Business Standard date 6 September 2016 available at http://www.business-standard.com/article/politics/aap-tickets-sold-for-money-in-punjab-such-a-singh-chhotepur-116090601000_1.html (as seen on 28 January 2018).
- ⁶ The Indian Express date 9 September 2016 available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/crime-corruption-character-failure-in-three-cs-will-cost-you-ticket-in-punjab-arvind-kejriwal-warns-aap-candidates-punjab-elections-3021198/> (as seen on 16 March 2018).
- ⁷ The Times of India date 18 December 2017 available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/aap-wins-just-1-out-of-414-seats-in-municipal-council-polls/articleshow/62110683.cms> (as seen on 21 December 2017).
- ⁸ The Tribune date 18 December 2017 available at <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/cong-sweeps-punjab-civic-elections-oppn-cries-foul/514939.html> (as seen on 25 December 2017).
- ⁹ English Tribune date 27 February 2018 available at <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/congress-sweeps-ludhiana-mc-poll-win-62-of-95-wards/550515.html> (as seen on 16 March 2018).
- ¹⁰ Singh, P (2018) 'Let AAP turmoil be 'Creative Destruction'', *The Tribune*, March 19.