

Editor's Introduction to Special Issue

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Introduction

As readers of this Journal will be acutely aware East Punjab's political history after the blood-soaked Partition of 1947 was a rollercoaster, particularly in the first two decades. Resentment regarding outcomes of Partition, especially among Sikhs who felt their interests were overlooked, soon led to demands for *Punjabi Suba*. This created tensions between Hindus and Sikhs, with the former interpreting it as anti-national and the latter seeking greater safeguards given their minority status in a Hindu majority state. Various twists and turns in Punjab politics strengthened communal tensions but in the aftermath of two conflicts - Sino-Indian in 1962 and Indo-Pakistan in 1965 - and imperatives of linguistic re-organization, Punjab experienced trifurcation in 1966. Large territories were lost in carving out a new state of Haryana and several hilly districts were transferred to Himachal Pradesh. Thus, a new modern Punjab came into being but having only around 20 percent of the territory of Colonial Punjab. Although this had the effect of creating a Sikh majority state for the first time in Punjab's history, electoral compulsions would still require forging of alliances. Much like the 1947 Partition, this second Partition in 1966 also left a number of unresolved issues which continue to dominate Punjab politics even today, more than 50 years later.

The first elections to the new Punjab Assembly were held in 1967 and empowered a Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) led coalition to govern. This election was also significant for ending Congress rule ever since 1947. Since then, very much like the region's dominant crop rotation between wheat and rice, Punjab has been ruled by either SAD or Congress governments. Although full-term governments were a rarity, the anti-incumbency factor continued to triumph, with the opposition party winning the election every time. However, in the post-militancy period, starting with the controversial 1992 election, Punjab entered a new phase of democratic politics and in fact since 1997 has experienced an exceptional period of full-term governments. Furthermore, in 2012, the SAD-BJP alliance set a historical record by winning a second successive term, defying earlier trends. Thus in 2017, after 10 years of continuous SAD/BJP rule supporters of both the alliance and Congress were energized. Was it really possible for SAD-BJP to win a historic third term? Was that not a realistic aspiration given the terminal decline of Congress all over India? However the elephant in the room was the Aam Aadmi Party which had made a spectacular debut in Punjab in 2014 by winning 4 parliamentary seats. Was AAP on the verge of breaking the mold of two-party dominated dynastic politics? So much appeared to be at stake, not least the prospects of long-desired alternative

politics. Given this context the JSPS decided to commission papers which would focus on different dimensions of the 2017 Punjab Assembly elections.

In this special issue we include seven papers which reflect on different aspects of the election with the eighth focusing on subsequent Lok Sabha and municipal elections to assess whether the Congress sustained its earlier momentum. The opening paper by Ronki Ram provides a highly detailed account of the hierarchical structure created by AAP which undoubtedly contributed to its dismal failure. He also raises a larger question about whether a third alternative is actually feasible in Punjab within existing political structures and modes of incorporation of marginalized communities. The second paper by Harminder Kaur provides a historical account of party alliances in Punjab with a view to providing an explanation for the 'inevitable' failure of the SAD-BJP 'marriage of convenience' in the 2017 election. The Dalit community constitutes one of the largest electoral constituencies in Punjab and Prerna Trehan's contribution highlights both the organizational limitations and mobilization challenges confronting this community, preventing it from emerging as a potent force in Punjab politics. Sucha S Gill provides a devastating critique of quality of governance and policy paralysis during the last decade to explain the colossal failure of the SAD-BJP alliance. With demographic changes in mind Ashutosh Kumar and his colleagues Mahajan and Kaur provide convincing arguments around both the merits and potential permanency of a triangular party system and perceive the emergence of AAP as a positive development, despite its failure to deliver on expectations during this election. The next two papers by Sekhon & Sharma and Bhatti & Jeji provide interesting details on changing voter behavior and preferences given unprecedented information flows across social media platforms. The final contribution by Pritam Singh & Mann throws light on the Gurdaspur by-election and recent municipal elections and argue that Congress not only retained its winning momentum, but elections also confirmed the dramatic decline in support for AAP.

There was a plethora of issues that dominated this election, as emphasized by different contributors but voter concerns over quality of governance, failures to deal with increasing lawlessness and mafia rule, rampant corruption with impunity, agrarian and environmental crisis, rising unemployment and indifference towards arresting the decline of Punjab, proved to be important in voter minds. An important lesson this election teaches us is that development issues matter and people of Punjab are becoming more nuanced in differentiating between populist rhetoric and delivery on promises. Let us see if the faith placed by the electorate in the Congress Party to deliver on promises lives up to expectations.

Finally, putting a special issue together is always challenging but the burden is somewhat alleviated because of the generous assistance of colleagues. We want to thank all the contributors for not only submitting their papers in a timely manner but also for their patience in waiting for their publication. Lastly, I would also like to record the assistance of several external reviewers, especially Pritam Singh and Rajkamal Mann, for their timely evaluations.