The Illusion and Reality of anti-Modi Wave in the Punjab 2019 General Election: A Note

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Punjab's 2019 General Election results have some similarity in terms of response to the so-called Modi wave with the General Election results in 2014 but also substantial difference. During the 2014 elections, Punjab had demonstrated its political distinctiveness from the rest of India most spectacularly in the way it had defied the Modi wave then but in 2019, there is an appearance of the same political tendency repeating itself. But beneath that appearance, there is an underlying reality which tells a different story. During the 2014 elections, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which could not win even a single seat in any other state and lost deposits in most of the seats it contested, won four seats from Punjab and with massive margins of victory. So powerful was the AAP wave in Punjab that even the remaining seats it contested but did not win, its candidates polled lakhs of votes. The AAP performance in Punjab in 2014 seemed to indicate that it could have all India implications in terms of emerging as a non-Congress alternative to BJP (Singh, 2018). Within Punjab, it certainly raised expectations that a third alternative political current can emerge in opposition to the two main traditional rivals - Indian National Congress (INC) and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) (Badal) (Singh, 2017).

The non-democratic mode of functioning of Arvind Kejriwal, the head of the AAP, created deep splits in the party which dashed any hopes of the party emerging as an all India party. It had even more disastrous consequences for Punjab in the form of AAP winning only one seat (Sangrur) in 2019 and losing in a humiliating way all the remaining 12 seats it had contested (see Appendix 1). One very unfortunate outcome of this split in 2019 has been the damage it did to Dr. Dharamvira Gandhi who had, in a historic contest, defeated Preneet Kaur from the Patiala royal family during the 2014 General Elections. During the 2019 elections, he was not only defeated but came third, though with a substantial vote of more than lakh and a half.

The Punjab Democratic Alliance (PDA), which emerged later after AAP's organizational chaos creating hopes of PDA developing as a possible third alternative in Punjab, suffered from poor organisational structure, lack of clarity in its programme and cohesiveness. Although this attempted third alternative, assembled in rush, did not achieve any success, but as an idea it had its own importance in the political future of Punjab. Though none of the PDA candidates won any seat, one of its candidates Simarjeet Singh Bains came second in Ludhiana pushing SAD candidate to a third position. Two other PDA candidates

(Bibi Paramjit Kaur Khalra from Khadoor Sahib and Balwinder Kumar from Jalandhar) polled more than 2 lakh votes each. The combined vote share of all the six parties comprising the PDA came up to 10.65% which was greater than the 7.38% vote share of AAP (see Notes 2 and 3 in Appendix 1). PDA certainly had a better claim than that of AAP to emerge as a third political tendency in Punjab opposed both to the Akali-BJP alliance and the Congress. It can be expected that the CPM, which was not part of PDA this time, may join it in the future especially if the third alternative is able to further strengthen itself.

The Congress victory in 8 seats out of the total 13 seats from Punjab does give the appearance that Punjab has defied the Modi wave again in 2019. The fact that Kerala is the only other state where Congress had a good performance, the Congress performance in Punjab seems to acquire an added significance as an indication of possible anti-Modi wave. This Congress performance needs to be further probed to get a better grip on the political currents in Punjab. The hard-core electoral reality is that Amritsar seat is the only seat where the Congress won with a clear majority vote (51.78%) (see Appendix 1). Jalandhar seat was won by a very small margin. In Anandpur Sahib, Patiala, Faridkot, and especially Khadoor Sahib, Ludhiana and Fatehgarh Sahib, Congress won due to a sharp division within the anti-Congress vote.

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) did not win any seat but in Anandpur Sahib, Hoshiarpur and Jalandhar where the party fielded its candidates according to the seat sharing arrangement with the Punjab Democratic Alliance, voters gave it a very good response to its candidates. Its candidates in Anandpur Sahib and Hoshiarpur polled more than one lakh votes each and its candidate Balwinder Kumar in Jalandhar demonstrated proof of the party's strong vote base by bagging more than 2 lakh votes. In any future third alternative in Punjab, BSP has the potential to hold an important place.

Of the two seats - Gurdaspur and Hoshiarpur – that BJP won, the Gurdaspur victory could be attributed to a combination of two factors - its electoral base and the popularity of the actor Sunny Deol who was its candidate. The influence of the BJP and strength of the Modi wave in Punjab is wider and stronger than the victory in just two seats may indicate. The Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal) also won only two seats - Firozpur and Bathinda - in contrast with having won 4 seats during the 2014 election. It is important to note that the Bathinda seat was won by Akali Dal candidate Harsimrat Kaur Badal mainly due to the urban Hindu voters voting substantially in her favour. This Hindu vote in Bathinda is partly due to Badals' long established links among upper caste Hindu notables but is also substantially due to the Modi wave. Mrs Badal did not get the similar response from the Sikh majority non-urban segments of the constituency due to widely shared anti-Badal sentiments within the Sikh community. Those segments voted substantially for Congress not because of any strong enthusiasm for the Congress party which is still disliked due to Party's role in Operation Bluestar and anti-Sikh carnage in Delhi in 1984 but because of strong sentiments against the Badals. These anti-Badal sentiments in the Sikh community had been brewing for two reasons: one, the suspicion that the Badals have been making deals with Dera Sacha Sauda for electoral reasons, and two, that the police firing

on the peaceful Sikh protestors in Behbal Kalan village in Faridkot district in 2015 against the sacrilege of Shri Guru Granth Sahib had the approval of Parkash Singh Badal, the then Chief Minister and his son Sukhbir Singh Badal, the then Deputy Chief Minister. These allegations have not been proved but they stick nonetheless due to the widespread circulation of these allegations. The fact that Sukhbir Singh Badal won from Firozpur with a massive lead shows that these allegations are not uniformly accepted by the Sikhs and that Akali Dal continues to have a solid electoral base at least in that region of Punjab.

It is not only in Bathinda but in some other constituencies in Punjab too, the role of urban upper caste Hindu voters has been significant in determining the election result. It may seem strange to someone not familiar with Punjab politics that sometimes it is Congress and not the BJP or its ally Akali Dal that is beneficiary of the consolidation of this urban upper caste Hindu vote. Although no recent data is available on the percentage of upper caste Hindu population in Punjab, it is generally believed that though the total Hindu population in Punjab is currently 38.49% (see Appendix 2), the upper caste Hindu population is only around 13-14 percent due to a high proportion of Scheduled Caste population among the Punjabi Hindus. This 13-14 percent upper caste Hindu population section is economically the most prosperous, educationally the most advanced and politically the most self-conscious section of Punjabi society. This segment is particularly concentrated in the main urban centres of Amritsar, Ludhiana, Jalandhar, Patiala and Bathinda but is also present in substantial numbers in smaller urban centres too. This social group influences election results critically in 23 assembly constituencies out of the total 117 constituencies. In all electoral alliances between Akali Dal (Badal) and BJP for the Punjab Assembly Elections, these 23 seats are allocated to BJP to contest due to the critical demographic strength of the Punjabi Hindu community in these seats. It is a very well networked community, not necessarily through formal networks but through multi-dimensional social, private and informal networks. The community exercises its political influence in a quiet but very effective manner.[1] In every election in Punjab, the community seems to make a collective choice. This choice is sometimes in favour of Congress, another time in favour of BJP (or its earliest form Jan Sangh) and still at other times in favour of Akali Dal as, for example, in the 1985 Assembly elections after Operation Bluestar when 'A section of the Hindu voters had also voted for the Akali Dal because of the fear that its [Akali Dal's] defeat might strengthen the militant Sikh groups' (Singh 2008:48). To use terms like secular or communal to characterise the collective political behaviour of this community on the basis of its voting preferences for one or the other political party would be inadequate. For example, in this election in Ludhiana constituency, the overwhelming vote of this community group was for the Congress candidate Ravneet Singh Bittu who is grandson of the late Chief Minister Beant Singh. Beant Singh along with his then police chief KPS Gill are seen by an overwhelming majority of the Sikhs as butchers of Sikh youth during the period of violent conflict between the Indian state and armed Sikh opposition groups but they are seen by an overwhelming majority of urban

upper caste Hindus as their saviours from the feared violence of Sikh extremists. The Congress party being aware of this polarisation, chose to field Bittu from Ludhiana and managed to ensure victory. To call this victory as a vote for secularism would make a mockery of whatever meaning can be associated with secularism.

Therefore, Congress victory in 8 seats in Punjab does not imply the strength of anti-Modi wave if the meaning and implication of Modi wave is consolidation of Hindu identity. During the 2019 general election, the urban upper caste Punjabi Hindu community displayed a remarkable consolidation of Hindu identity and the use of that consolidation in influencing the electoral results in Punjab. A two way mutually reinforcing relationship can be discerned between the consolidation of this Punjabi Hindu identity and Modi's Hindutva politics. The consolidation of Punjabi Hindu identity is a validation of Modi's Hindutva politics, and, in turn, Modi's Hindutva politics validates and empowers the idea of consolidation of Hindu identity among urban upper caste Punjabi Hindus. The fact that this social group chose to vote Congress - its often-alternative choice in Punjab - in some constituencies such as in Ludhiana and possibly in Anandpur Sahib where Manish Tiwari was the Congress candidate against Akali Dal's Prem Singh Chandumajra, is no indicator of the absence of Modi wave of Hindutva politics. In Ludhiana, the available choice was between Sikh candidates from three main contending parties- Congress (Bittu), PDA/Lok Insaaf Party (Bains) and Akali (Maheshinder Singh Grewal). The upper caste urban Punjabi Hindu voters chose Bittu as best representing the perceived Hindu interests due to his grandfather's role in repressing Sikh militancy. In Anandpur Sahib, the Congress candidate was Tiwari whose father was a Hindu (the late Prof V N Tiwari whose assassination shortly before Operation Bluestar is widely believed to have been carried out by a Sikh extremist group) and mother is a Sikh. Tiwari's main electoral opponent in Anandpur Sahib was a Sikh (Akali Dal's Chandumajra). Here the urban upper caste Punjabi Hindus demonstrated their strategic collective choice by voting for Tiwari even though Akali Dal was BJP ally.

Tiwari's victory, however, could be also attributed, in some measure, to another factor namely abstention of pro-Akali Sikh voters. The Sikh voters all over Punjab had shown resentment against Badal Akali Dal due to the sacrilege issue we discussed earlier. This would have led to abstention from voting of a substantial number of potentially pro-Akali Sikh voters. The strategical and tactical voting behaviour of the urban upper caste Punjabi Hindu community in these two parliamentary constituencies we have discussed is a demonstration of the consolidation of urban upper caste Punjabi Hindu identity. Modi' Hindutva political platform has reinforced and empowered the collective identity of upper caste Punjabi Hindus in a manner no other political tendency in Punjab had done before. Historically speaking, the only political tendency somewhat close to Modi influence in consolidating urban upper caste Punjabi Hindu identity in Punjab was Arya Samaj (see Banga, 2015) which has been subsumed now under the wider arch of Modi-led Hindutva politics. The fact that the Congress party has won majority of the seats from Punjab during the 2019 General Election

may create the illusion of an anti-Modi wave in Punjab but the reality beneath the creation of that illusion is complex and contradictory to that illusion.

The Left parties once had a very solid political base in Punjab. In one assembly election in the 1950's the CPI had polled nearly 25% of the total vote in the districts which constitute the present Punjab. Even as late as 1980 when the CPI and CPM had contested the assembly elections in alliance with Akali Dal, they had won 15 seats (CPI 8 and CPM 7). After that, the Left parties have been in an electoral decline and that is evident from their poor performance during the 2019 election. The electoral decline of the Left in Punjab can be attributed significantly to the pro-Indian state political position of support for the mindless discourse of unity and integrity of the 'nation' during the 1980s and 1990s. Consequently, it led to Left's alienation from its Sikh support base. Undoubtedly, the Left's decline in Punjab is a reflection also of the changes in the social and political culture of Punjab from an earlier phase of social solidarity to the one oriented more towards individualism as a result of the cultural offshoots of the rise of neo-liberalism in politics and society. The Left in Punjab has not engaged adequately through deep, honest, and critical self-reflection with the political, social and cultural determinants of its decline. Although it is heartening to note from a human rights perspective which should become integral to the Left perspective that one human rights activist - Bibi Paramjit Kaur Khalra - received more than 2 lakh votes without any adequate organizational and financial resources. This inadequacy in organisational and financial resources in comparison with the massive resources at the command of the Congress candidate Jasbir Singh Dimpa was an important factor in her defeat. However, it is still a reflection of the relative weakness of the traction of human rights movement in Punjab that she lost the election from Khadoor Sahib. Bibi Khalra is the widow of late Jaswant Singh Khalra who gave his life in the defense of human rights in Punjab. During the 2019 election period, a youth (Jaspal Singh) from Faridkot district was arrested by police and later disappeared. His family members and human rights activists suspect that he was tortured to death during interrogation at the police station. This horrible episode points to the continuing need to monitor and protect human rights for which the Khalra family has made many sacrifices.

The tragedy of human rights movement in Punjab has been that it has been a victim of sectarianism and fragmentation because at different points of time, different political groups in Punjab have experienced human rights violations (Singh, 1998, 2010). This has thwarted the articulation of a collective Punjabi voice on human rights. Bibi Khalra was the first parliamentary candidate to bring universal and non-sectarian approach towards human rights (Singh, 2019). She deserved the support of all progressive political tendencies in Punjab to strengthen the culture of respect for human rights. There was one good turning point in the political culture of Punjab during these elections, namely that Left activists actively supported Bibi Khalra and thus took critical steps forward in making a transition towards a non-sectarian approach towards human rights. This augurs well for the emergence in the near future of a sustainable third

alternative in Punjab politics. This possible third political alternative will have to realise the seriousness of the global ecological crisis of our era, which has a direct impact on Punjab. One recent report by a Central Ground Water Board study posits a threatening scenario with Punjab turning into a desert within next 25 years due to overexploitation of its ground water resources caused by the cultivation of water guzzling rice crop (Mann, 2017, The Tribune, 2019). This is even more important because during this election, the political parties in Punjab demonstrated almost complete illiteracy about the ecological crisis facing Punjab as a part of the global ecological crisis. The emergence of a third alternative in Punjab that combines the triple perspectives of human rights, ecological sustainability and egalitarianism would be the only true negation of Modi-led Hindutva politics.

Note

[1] The rural-urban differences in political culture in Punjab where the urban communities (Hindu or Sikh in the post-1947 period; and Hindu, Muslim or Sikh in the pre-1947 period) have shown a more developed collective (or 'communal' in the usual Indian discourse on 'communalism') identities than the rural communities is a relatively under-studied area in Punjab's history and political sociology. For some very perceptive remarks on pluralist traditions in rural communities in pre-1947, see Josh 2007. For a critique of India's communalism discourse, see Singh 2015.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Constituency –wise and party-wise results from Punjab (2019 General Election)

Constituency	Congress		SAD[1]		BJP[1]		AAP	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Votes polled	% Share	Votes polled	% Share	Votes polled	% Share	Votes polled	% Share
Amritsar	445032	51.78			345406	40.19	20087	2.34
Anandpur Sahib	428045	39.57	381161	35.24			53052	4.9
Bathinda	471052	39.23	492824	41.04			134398	11.19
Faridkot	419065	42.98	335809	34.44			115319	11.83
Fatehgarh Sahib	411651	41.75	317753	32.23			62881	6.38

Firozpur	434577	37.08	633427	54.05			31872	2.72
Gurdaspur	476260	43.14			558719	50.61	27744	2.51
Hoshiarpur	372790	37.63			421320	42.52	44914	4.53
Jalandhar	385712	37.85	366221	35.94			25467	2.5
Khadoor Sahib	459710	43.95	319137	30.51			13656	1.31
Ludhiana	383795	36.66	299435	28.6			15945	1.52
Patiala	532027	45.17	369309	31.35			56877	4.83
Sangrur	303350	27.43	263498	23.83			413561	37.4

Source: Election Commission of India (ECI)

Appendix 1 contd.

Constituency	PDA[2,3]			Ind/others		NOTA	
1	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
	Votes polled	% Share	Party	Votes polled	% Share	Votes polled	% Share
Amritsar	16335	1.9	CPI	23890	2.77	8763	1.02
Anandpur Sahib	146441	13.54	BSP	55893	5.18	17135	1.58
Bathinda	38199	3.18	PEP	51014	4.28	13323	1.11
Faridkot	43932	4.51	PEP	41576	4.26	19246	1.97
Fatehgarh Sahib	142274	14.43	LIP	38344	3.9	13045	1.32
Firozpur	26128	2.23	CPI	31138	2.64	14891	1.27
Gurdaspur	15274	1.38	RMPI	16330	1.47	9560	0.87
Hoshiarpur	128564	12.98	BSP	10335	1.04	12868	1.3
Jalandhar	204783	20.1	BSP	24491	2.4	12324	1.21
Khadoor Sahib	214489	20.51	PEP	33910	3.23	5130	0.49
Ludhiana	307423	29.36	LIP	29819	2.86	10538	1.01
Patiala	161645	13.72	NPP	46935	4	11110	0.94
Sangrur	20087	1.82	LIP	98902	8.96	6490	0.59

Source: Election Commission of India (ECI)
Notes: For appendix 1

1. In the SAD-BJP alliance seat arrangement, the BJP contested three seats as shown in the table above (Appendix 1) and the remaining ten were contested by SAD.
2. The PDA stands for Punjab Democratic Alliance which comprises of 6 parties viz CPI, BSP, PEP (Punjab Ekta Party lead by rebel AAP MLA Sukhpal Singh Khaira), LIP (Lok Insaaf Party led by sitting MLA Simarjeet Singh Bains), RMPI Revolutionary Marxist Party of India (led by Mangat Ram Pasla), NPP (Nawan Punjab Party led by suspended AAP MP Dr. Dharamvira Gandhi).
3. The combined vote share of the PDA is not given on the ECI website, however, from the data available at the ECI website we calculated the combined vote share of all the six parties comprising the PDA which came up to 10.65% which is greater than the vote share of AAP which is 7.38%.

Appendix 2: Religious composition of Punjab's population 2001 and 2011 (%)

Religion	2001	2011
Hindu	36.94	38.49
Muslim	1.57	1.93
Christian	1.20	1.26
Sikh	59.91	57.69

Source of data: For 2001

http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_data_finder/C_Series/Population_by_religious_communities.htm

Source of data: For 2011

http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/C-01.htm