

Electoral Politics in Punjab: The Third Options of Scheduled Castes

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Punjab has always been an important center of political movements among the lower castes. Mobilization of the scheduled castes by different reform movements in the state made them very early aware of their political rights and they were quick to organise themselves into various political groups. The first separate political formation of the scheduled castes movement had emerged in the form of Ad-Dharm movement that later merged with the Ambedkar's Scheduled caste federation and subsequently got transformed into the Republican Party of India. With the formation of the BSP in 1980's the scheduled caste of Punjab entered the vibrant decade of the identity politics. Currently with the emergence of AAP, dalit politics in the state has entered a new stage with every political party announcing a dalit to be a Chief Minister, if voted to power. Given this background, the article argues, a third force appealing to the scheduled castes have always existed in the state but support of the scheduled castes to the third front has been rather short-lived and they failed to be seen to be mobilizing for the broader identity movement until the emergence of AAP. The paper investigates different phases of political assertion among the scheduled castes and reasons as to why earlier third options in the state having appeal among the lower castes could not take off and how AAP channelized the scheduled castes aspirations to be a major contender in the state politics.

Introduction

The faction ridden Congress delivered a huge surprise when it chose Charanjit Singh Channi to be the next Chief Minister..... Channi is not only a dalit but also a Sikh" (Manraj Grewal, 2021).

With the appointment of Charanjit Singh Channi as the chief minister, the state of Punjab has become the first state in north India to have a leader from the scheduled caste community. Dalits form 31.94 per cent of the Punjab's population (Scheduled Caste Sub Plan, 2021:1). Despite having a sizeable electorate witnessing early mobilizations making them aware of their political rights, Punjabi dalits are rarely seen to be mobilizing for a wider All India political identity as compared to the scheduled castes in other states (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh). Competitive politics within the parliamentary framework, with the provision of reservation of seats, has created political consciousness among dalits on an unprecedented scale (Shah, 2001:41). Increased voting by the scheduled castes, shifts in party preference -with

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) emerging as their first choice, left parties as second and regional parties in the state where other options are absent are common patterns of scheduled caste assertion through voting. Punjab, however, is an exception as the state, despite having all the options available - SCF, RPI, Leftist, BSP, currently Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and regional party, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) - the support of the scheduled castes to alternative parties has been so far short-lived. The election results of the state suggests that the scheduled castes have followed the pattern of first supporting and later withdrawing their support to the third parties (SCF/RPI/BSP). The Congress and the Shiromani Akali Dal have alternated as the dominant parties ever since Punjab was reorganized in 1966, leading to a stable bi-party system in the state. Despite numerous attempts of new parties, a third front has never succeeded, until the emergence of AAP that formed the government in 2022.

Given this context, the current article, through review of literature and data collected from CSDS-Lokniti election studies, seeks to understand the reasons as to why third front formations have not been successful in Punjab and support to them remains rather bleak. It also looks into the rise, popularity of AAP and factors leading to its massive victory.

The article studies three phases: (i) early phase of independent political movements among the scheduled castes before finally getting co-opted into Congress (ii) emergence and decline of BSP and the lastly (iii) Rise of AAP.

Phase I: Factors leading to emergence of early independent political formations in early years

Punjab has always been an important centre of anti-caste politics that led to early emergence of independent political and cultural movements in the state. Two phases of the movements can be observed in the development of dalit consciousness during the colonial period in Punjab. An early phase from 1920s to 1940s is a period of gradual awakening where the scheduled castes supported the ongoing religious movements to get integrated into mainstream religions. The second phase starts from 1940s onwards during which they started their own independent movements, made attempts to enter the political arena and claimed separate identity for themselves to obtain a share of power.

Early Phase: Even though known for absence of a rigid caste hierarchy, the state of Punjab has witnessed early religious reform and social movements among the lower castes. This was pre-dominantly a consequence of existence of various reformist religious groups in the state. The Church, Arya Samaj, Sikh Sabha and Sufi movements promoted their respective interests among the lower castes while trying to win them to their coteries to secure an edge over each other in terms of numbers. These movements were significant as they not only generated much criticism of the caste system but also 'hammer out an independent space in the then evolving electoral number game by winning over the fluid and floating Dalit population to their side (Ram, 2012: 685).

The presence of Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism added dilemma to the scheduled castes who did not have their own organization to defend and promote

their interests and were unable to decide whether to be a Hindu or Sikh. In short, in this phase, communal unrest and process of restructuring of population among the three major communities - Hindu, Sikhs, and Muslims - made lower castes aware of their numbers, leading to early emergence of the need of political formations representing their interests.

Cultural movements take political overtones

The presence of contending religious ideologies provided the lower castes a platform to build upon the larger political movements in the later phase. The introduction of education by Arya Samaj, opening of opportunities by the colonial rulers due to growing demand for leather goods to supply the British army, introduction of representative politics changed the discourse of the low-caste movement in the state. The Arya Samaj provided young untouchables with ideas of social equality not only by allowing them to attend its schools but also by creating service organizations such as the *Dayanand Dalit Udhar* at Hoshiarpur and *Achhut Udhar* at Lahore (Juergensmeyer, 2000: 222).

The process of creating absolute categories intensified with the introduction of census by the British. In the mind of the colonial power, there was a desire to know differences among the Indian people, which could be helpful in matters of governance and continuance of power, and also there was a curiosity to know whether any social group in India constituted a nation in the European sense of the term (Bhagat, 2021). They therefore 'encouraged members of each community to present their case in communitarian terms' (Grewal, 1998:195) which had a far-reaching impact on the process of identity formation among the lower castes in the region. The inclusion of some Sikh caste groups into martial communities and recognition and promotion of their privileges in the local agrarian economy during colonial rule further helped the Jat Sikhs to consolidate their position in regional politics and economics (Jodhka and Myrvold, 2014: 73).

Identities were further sharpened by passing of the Punjab Land Alienation Act in 1900, by colonial rulers that legally forbided many castes from owning land. To quote Guilhem Cassan: 'By creating an "agricultural tribes" category, the membership of which was almost compulsory to buy or sell land, it created a very strong incentive for caste groups to manipulate their caste identity to claim membership to a caste group actually considered as an agricultural tribe to be able to enter the land market' (Cassan, 2011). The system of separate electorates introduced in 1909 and 1919 further exacerbated communal and separatist politics (Tanwar 1999: 29). As a result of the democratic processes introduced by the British government, each community moved ahead, organizing its respective members into a political force distinct from the others.

It was during this time when Mangoo Ram organized the Ad-dharm movement for the lower castes, who earlier had remained spectators in declaring themselves to be Hindu or Sikh. The Ad-Dharm movement initiated not only the beginning of autonomous dalit politics in the region but also an independent political force in the state that ran parallel to INC/Gandhian discourse

representing only national interests. The main objective of the movement was to establish untouchables as a separate *qaum* a distinct religious community like that of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs and that the *qaum* had existed from time immemorial (Juergensmeyer, 1988: 45). When the 1931 census approached, the Ad-Dharmis insisted they are a separate community and not to be considered as Hindus. Despite stiff opposition from Hindu leadership, their demand was accepted, and they carved out a niche for themselves (Jodhka, 2004:181).

The movement was primarily religious-cultural though many Ad-Dharmi leaders remained active in political processes. In the 1940s came a significant break, when educated leaders from lower castes turned their attention to the national movement and became interested in the activities of Ambedkar and his disagreements with Gandhi. Juergensmeyer described this process of change as the “Ambedkar Alternative” while Lynch described it as a “turning point” (Juergensmeyer, 1988:163; Lynch, 1969:86-87).

Like other lower caste movements in other states, the Ad-Dharm movement had differences with Gandhi and the national movement and favored the British. This attitude was shaped by their belief that Congress and Gandhi were ploys of the upper castes and an enlightened British ideal for India was more appealing to the Ad-Dharmis than Gandhi's. For instance, in 1928, the movement reacted to Moti Lal Nehru's call for the abolition of separate electorates by declaring:

‘We hope that.... the ghost of the untouchability will be sunk, along with the Nehru Report, in the river Ravi’ (Ad-Dharm Mandal Report). In another instance, when Gandhi sat on his fast-unto-death at Poona against the separate electorate for untouchables, Mangoo Ram followed suit declaring: ‘Gandhi if you are prepared to die for your Hindus, then I am prepared to die for these untouchables’ (Ram, 2004:334).

The other major political demands of the Ad-Dharmis included - formation of Achutistan (a separate state for *achhuts*), proportionate representation in government jobs, participation in the British army. Their economic demands ranged from general requests directed to the government procurement officers to purchase shoes and leather goods directly from the Ad-Dharm Mandal in Jalandhar city. Politically, the major achievement of Ad Dharm movement was that it swept the reserved provincial assembly seats of Punjab in the 1937 and 1946 elections, which made it an important stakeholder in the legislature, perhaps for the first time in the history of the untouchables in colonial India (Ram, 2021).

To further seek additional means of access to power, Mangoo Ram floated the idea of joining forces with the Unionist party, a group dominated by large Muslim landlords that controlled Punjab politics. The Unionist Muslims and Ad-Dharm together opposed upper caste Hindus, Sikhs and Indian National Congress. In the elections to the Punjab Legislative Assembly 1945-46, the Muslim League won 79 seats, Congress 51 seats, the Panthic league won 22, the Unionist and Independents, 10 each (Juergensmeyer, 1988:150). Soon after this

election and collapse of the unionist coalition, the Ad Dharm movement merged with the All India Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF) that was later transformed into Republican Party of India (RPI). Hence the first independent movement of the lower castes lost the momentum in the state as it merged with Ambedkar movement. The Ambedkar movement was limited to the middle class and could not spread among the masses despite significant visits by Dr. Ambedkar to the state. Lack of strong leadership, divisions among the leadership and the ability of the Congress to emerge as a broad-based dominant party prevented the SCF/RPI to emerge successful in the state see Table 1.

The Communist movement in the state also failed to attract lower caste support due to its abstract ideology. The party also had its roots in Sikhism, especially within the Akali Dal and Singh Sabha movements. The Communist strength mainly came from the “middle class” small landowners who were by and large Sikh Jats. Furthermore, from 1936 onwards, the activities of both Communist groups merged with the Congress. Consequently, it became extremely difficult to distinguish between strictly “communist activity” and “nationalist activity” (Josh, 2000:248). Henceforth, three independent political formations representing lower castes interest- Ad-dharm /Ambedkarite/Communist movements - failed to emerge as independent third options representing lower castes interest.

Table 1: Percentage of votes polled by SCF and RPI in Punjab

Year	SCF	RPI	CPI
1952	3.8	-	6.1
1957	6.2	-	17.7
1962	-	2.8	9.8
1967	-	1.1	5.2
1969	-	1.1	5.0
1972	-	0.2	6.5

Source: Columns picked up from Paul Brass (2005) *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, p. 371.

The smaller movements and political formations (Ad-dharm/SCF/RPI) were finally co-opted into a electorally more dominant Congress as we can see from Table 2 below. The Congress emerged as the main party in the state representing interests of all major groups and communities. The support of the scheduled castes to the Congress was the result of multiple factors. At the national level, it was the result of radical image and populist policies of the Congress such as ‘*Garibi Hatao*’ and 20-point program that strengthened the Congress base among the lower castes. Many of these schemes were carried out under the central provision to bring about “total rural regeneration” (Pandey, 1974). The Congress also by the article 17 “abolished untouchability in all of its forms” (Galenter, 1982). Article 17 of the constitution forbided the practice of

untouchability in any form and made enforcement of any disability arising out of 'untouchability', an offence punishable in accordance with law. The principle of reserved constituencies, (article 330 and 332 of the constitution) in which seats are reserved for Scheduled Castes and Tribes based on the size of their population helped Congress to attract major scheduled caste groups in the state.

In Punjab, the scheduled castes saw Congress as the only egalitarian party among the major contenders, since the Akalis were aligned with the Sikhs, and the urban Hindus supported the Jan Sangh. The support of scheduled castes to the Congress was also the consequence of the co-option of important Ad-Dharmi leaders into the Congress. Most of the scheduled castes also entered the Congress directly through scheduled caste organizations and its sponsors - the Harijan League, The Depressed Classes League, The Bharat Dalit Sevak Sangh and the Harijan Sevak Sangh.

Table 2: Overwhelming Dominance of the Congress in Punjab (seats won)

Year	Congress	SAD
1952	96	13
1957	120	Not contested
1962	90	19
1967	40	Not contested
1969	38	43
1972	66	24
1977	17	58
1980	63	37
1985	32	73
1992	87	Not contested
1997	14	75
2002	62	41
2007	44	49
2012	46	56

2017	77	15
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Source: Collected from various elections reports.

Growing ascendancy of the Sikh Jats and the middle castes in the mid-1960s due to mobilization by their leaders and economic gains from the green revolution, led to the formation of parties such as the [Bharatiya Kranti Dal](#) (BKD) and Akali Dal (Frankel, 1977). As a result, caste conflicts among the laborers (who mainly happen to be scheduled caste groups) and the dominant Sikh Jats (represented by Akalis) increased, and the Congress emerged as the major political choice of scheduled castes protecting their interests. In addition, the fear of the scheduled castes, that creation of the Punjabi Suba by Akali Dal will lead to a Sikh majority state leading to domination of the Jats, made them overwhelmingly support the Congress (Nayyar, 1966: 460).

To conclude, this phase can be described as phase of integration and co-option with early third parties failing to mobilize and Congress enjoying the greatest measure of popularity. Other political parties in Punjab - the SAD and the Jan Sangh - also tried to mobilize scheduled castes, yet their roots in a particular section of the society proved to be detrimental in reaching the constituencies of the scheduled castes.

Phase II: Emergence and Decline of BSP as a Third Force

In 1980's the scheduled caste movement in Punjab entered a new phase of separation from the mainstream parties. There was growing realization among the lower castes that the economic and political benefits of policies adopted by the INC and Akali Dal passed to the backward castes, mainly Jats and were rather limited to the scheduled castes. Further, the implementation of policies related to land reforms resulted in increasing caste conflicts and atrocities as the landowners were mainly Jats and the scheduled castes were either tenants or laborers.

This increasing awareness coincided with a number of parallel developments among the scheduled castes groups. Among the other transformations in Punjabi society, the changes brought by the green revolution opened new spaces for them to re-negotiate their relations with the dominant castes and rural social structure (Jodhka, 2014: 590). An important impact of the green revolution was the destruction of the *Jajmani* system and its replacement by contractual relationships (UNDP, 2004). Surinder Jodhka has popularly conceptualized the impact of green revolution on the nature of caste relations through the categories of '*Disassociation Distancing, and Autonomy*' (Jodhka, 2002). As a result of economic prosperity due to the green revolution, large majorities of dalits consciously *disassociated* themselves from their traditional polluting occupations and diversified into the service sector. Similarly, a large majority of dalits distanced themselves from the local agrarian economy and were no longer willing to work as laborers on long term basis with the landowners who were

mainly Jats. The dalits moved to alternative sources of employment and preferred to work in neighboring towns and cities. Explaining the phenomena, M. Rajivlochan (2009) says:

While their fathers were economically dependent on farmers of Punjab, the current crop of scheduled castes earn their livelihood from the modern service sector that is neutral to caste status and is satisfied with the service provider. The Punjabi farmer's dependence on the *purbia* labourer for the past three decades is a clear sign of the breakdown of the symbiotic relationship between the farmer and village dalits.

Another important change witnessed during this period was in the field of education.

Table 3: Scheduled Caste Literacy Rate (%) in Punjab

1961	1971	1981	1991	2011
9.64	16.12	23.86	41.1	64.81

Source: Census of 1961, 1971, 1981 and 1991 and 2011

As Table 3 shows, there has been a consistent rise in literacy rates of scheduled castes in Punjab. Increase in education contributed to increased awareness of low socio-economic status and a desire to change it. Rapid democratization of society in the 1980s, coupled with economic development, education and affirmative action, led to the emergence of a small, privileged, middle and lower-middle class, among the scheduled castes (mainly the *Ad-Dharmis*), who led new 'dalit assertiveness' in the 1980s and the 1990s (Omvedt, 1994:157). It led to growing awareness among the educated lower caste youth, even though they supported the dominant Congress party but were typically kept away from important political positions.

It was during this period of rapid growth of identity consciousness among the scheduled castes and discontentment with the Congress system that Kanshi Ram formed the BSP in 1984. The increase in the literacy rates of the *Ad-Dharmis* produced educated and discontented youth among them that constituted the main support base of the BSP. The single most important force driving the *Ad-Dharmis* towards the BSP was the representational blockage they found in every political party in the Punjab (Chandra, 2004: 190-191). Since the positions of power in the Punjab Congress organization and governments were monopolized by the upper and the intermediate castes, the newly emerging scheduled caste elites had little hope of raising their political status within existing political parties (Congress/Akali Dal/Communist Party) and they turned their attention to the BSP.

Performance of the BSP

Phase of growth: The BSP made its presence felt in the state polity in the very first Lok Sabha election it fought in 1989. The party fielded 12 candidates, won one seat, garnering 8.62 per cent of the votes. It contested roughly 60 of the 117 seats in the Punjab Legislative Assembly – that is, more than 50 percent contested (Chandra, 2004:191). In Doaba region, the shift of the Scheduled Caste vote was primarily from Congress to BSP, in the Majha region, in Amritsar, the Schedule Caste or *Mazhabhi* shift was from the Congress towards favour of the Akali Dal, causing BSP to win.

Table 4: BSP Performance in Punjab Assembly Elections

Year	Seats contested	Seats won	% of votes
1992	105	9	16.32
1997	67	1	7.48
2002	100	0	5.69
2007	115	0	4.13
2012	117	0	4.29
2017	111	0	1.52
2022		1	1.77

Source: collected from various election reports

As can be seen in Table 4 and 5, in the 1992 legislative Assembly elections of Punjab, the BSP vote share climbed to 16.3 percent, leading to the decline in the vote-share of the Congress. Since the Akalis did not participate, the only opposition to Congress was the BSP. The BSP was able to attract substantial number of dalit voters and cut into the dalit vote base of the Congress, with its candidates winning in as many as nine of the assembly constituencies. This was therefore an early phase of the growth of the BSP, during which it fought elections alone, thereby establishing a fixed social and regional support for itself. In fact, the results of the elections during the period between the 1992 and 1996 suggests that Congress could not improve its support base due to emergence of the BSP even though it controlled the government. In 1996, BSP won three of the thirteen parliamentary seats and recorded leads in as many as seventeen assembly constituencies in Punjab (Verma, 1999).

Table 5: BSP cuts into Congress base (Vote Share of BSP and Congress 1992 elections)

Party	Assembly	Parliamentary
Congress	43.83	49.27
BSP	16.32	19.71

Source: Information collected from election commission reports of respective elections

Phase of alliance formation: However, this growth was not sufficient for the BSP to come to power on its own in a state where votes got divided between three groups - Dalits, Hindus and the Sikhs and between two major political parties - Congress and Akali Dal. The growing importance of the BSP made all the major political formations realize the importance of voting by the Scheduled Caste groups and led all major political formations to look for an alliance with the BSP. This was particularly the case with the Akali Dal as BSP had limited social base among the Jat Sikhs and multiple internal factions within the party itself.

Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), therefore opened the option of an alliance with BSP, being aware of the fact that if BSP made an electoral adjustment with the Congress in Punjab, it would become difficult for the SAD-BJP alliance to win against the Congress. The Congress too realized that the strong presence of the BSP in the Doaba region (traditional Congress stronghold) would undermine its position and eventually lead both the major parties to open negotiations with the BSP for an electoral alliance.

As a result of alliance formation, the BSP came into limelight during parliamentary and assembly elections. The SAD contested the 1996 elections in alliance with the BSP. In terms of seats, the SAD alone got 8 out of 9 Lok Sabha seats contested by it in this election. The BSP, its alliance partner won 3 out of 4 that it had contested. Among other factors that worked in favor of the Akali Dal, one major factor that supported its victory in the 1996 Lok Sabha election, was its alliance with the BSP and 'seat adjustment with the Bhartiya Janata Party' (Kumar, 1996). The alliance also adversely affected Congress party's electoral performance.

The Congress lost on account of non-performance. It secured 'only 2 out of 13 Lok Sabha seats from Punjab' (Singh, 2015: 910). 'Operation BlueStar' and anti-Sikh riots in Delhi, following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, led people to vote against Congress. The policy of liberalization adopted by the Congress government at the Centre in 1991 also had an adverse effect in Punjab. Many sections of society were hit very hard by it. The Jat Sikh middle peasantry was severally affected by the policy of liberalization which had caused a sharp increase in the costs of fertilizer and pesticides. The Hindu traders were also adversely affected by it. Their profits were hit by growing contracted procurements by agri-business and by the emergence of large trading companies (Tiwana, 2000). As a result, these class groups turned against the Congress and switched over their support to the SAD.

Table 6: Performance of BSP, 1996 and 1998 Lok Sabha elections in Punjab

1996			1998	
State	Seats won	Total Vote (percent)	Seats Won	Total Vote (percent)

Punjab	3	8.96	0	12.65
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Source: Pushpendra, 2001: 332.

Table 7: Emergence of BSP and Start of System of Alliances in Punjab Assembly Elections

Assembly Election Years	1997	2002	2007	2012	2017	2022
Mainstream parties and alliances	SAD-BJP	SAD-BJP-DBSM	SAD-BJP	SAD-BJP	SAD-BJP	Congress
	INC-CPI	INC-CPI	INC	INC	INC	
	BSP-Akali Dal(M)			PPP-CPI-CPM-SAD(L)	AAP-LIP	SAD-BSP
Third Front	BSP-AKALI Dal(M)	DBSM	None	PPP-CPI-CPM-SAD(L)	AAP-LIP	AAP

Source: Data compiled from various Elections.

The growing vote share of the BSP and the need for alliances ‘not only promoted the culture of competitive populism but also led to the gradual discarding of the radical stances by the political parties all over the state’ (Kumar, 2005: 121). The impact of BSP on Akali Dal has been summarized by Prashar in the following words: ‘the Akali Dal would now try to transform itself into an organization representing all sections of Punjabis, irrespective of their caste, creed and religion, instead of being a body of the Sikhs alone’ (Prashar, 1996). In 1996, SAD celebrated its 75th anniversary conference at Moga and passed the ‘Moga Declaration’, where the party declared itself to be the true representative of Panth and used the symbol of ‘Punjab’, ‘Punjabis’ and ‘Punjabiati’ to broaden the base of party for upcoming elections. This declaration helped party in adopting a new image supporting all faiths rather than just being a party of Jat Sikhs and Khatri. It was in the 1996 elections the importance of the dalit vote-bank was recognized by each party and the parties catered to their demands by whole range of populist slogans addressing their economic concerns. The 1997 Assembly elections results suggest the worst ever performance by the Congress which secured 14 seats and 26 per cent vote share. The Shiromani Akali Dal won the largest number of seats, i.e., 75, and polled 37 per cent of the votes (Kumar, 2003). The Akali Dal strategy worked, and the combine got votes from all the sections of the society (Table 7).

Table 8: Party Preferences of scheduled castes and religious communities 1997

	Sikhs	Hindus	Sikh (SC)	Hindu (SC)
Akali	38%	27%	23%	12%
BJP	34%	45%	11	10%

Source: Pramod Kumar (1999) Punjab Changing Political Agenda

On the other hand, the BSP could get only the support of Hindu S.Cs. and Sikh S.Cs. (IDC, Election Survey, 1997). The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) was unable to strike a deal with either the Akali Dal (B) or the Congress (I). It fought the election in alliance with AD(M), a remnant of Akali Dal (A) (Singh, 1998). The party's share of seats collapsed from 9 in 1992 to 1 in 1997, and its share of the vote declined from 16.2% to 7.5% (Singh, 1998:405). After the 1997 assembly elections, the BSP could not win even a single seat in the Assembly, nor in Parliament from Punjab. Even its vote share reduced from 16.32% in 1992 to 1.9% in the 2014 general elections as it failed to inspire voters.

Split in the BSP on the eve of 1998 Lok Sabha elections was the reason for its poor performance in these elections. Satnam Singh Kainth deserted the BSP and formed the **Bahujan Samaj Morcha (BSM)** and contested the 1998 Lok Sabha elections in alliance with the SAD-BJP combine (Singh, 2016: 888). The SAD, taking advantage of this split, entered into an electoral adjustment with Satnam Singh Kainth's party, the BSM. Because of this development a large number of scheduled castes voted in favor of SAD candidates in these elections (Singh, 2016: 889).

In the 2002 Assembly election, the BSP could get only one seat and in the 2004 parliamentary elections it could not open its account. In 2007 assembly elections only 2 of the 117 candidates of the BSP could save their security deposits while rest could not get even one-sixth of the total votes polled (Kumar, 2007:276). In the 2012 Assembly elections too BSP performance remained poor, and it secured only 4.30 percent of the total vote (Agnihotri, 2014). In the 2017 assembly elections, the BSP contested 111 seats and managed a vote share of only 1.59% (Nibber, 2021). In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the BSP fought in an alliance of several parties, called the 'Punjab Democratic Alliance', and improved its performance a little - its vote percentage reached 3.5 percent (Shiv Inder Singh, 2021).

Decline of BSP

Despite being a viable third front, the BSP's strategies of coalitions and electoral alliances created much debate and division within the party. The immediate reason for the poor performance of the BSP was continuing deep division and splits over the issue of power sharing with the main parties, which weakened it on the eve of elections. The scheduled castes criticized its alliance with the Akali Dal. The failure of the leadership to find a genuine ally in social and political spheres led to great disillusionment among the scheduled castes groups as their newly formed identity and stirring political consciousness required them to move away from groups that had dominated them earlier. Following this the scheduled castes groups were able to recognize that the chances of BSP coming to power were very low and expectations of the scheduled castes soon began to fall when they saw the deteriorating performance of BSP. There was realization on the part of the community that the presence of three to four MLAs of BSP

did not make any difference and resulted in compromise with the mainstream parties. Further, the BSP laid down that a dalit president should be a *sahejdhari* Sikh. This represented its compromise with the main tenets of Sikhism and thereby adherence to the Jats.

Though the BSP aimed at creating a broad front of the dalits, the early BSP organization in Punjab was dominated by the Ad-Dharmis and rest of the groups of scheduled castes, mainly the *Mazhabhis* and *Valmiki*s felt threatened by the increasing influence of the Ad-Dharmis. Party's weak financial position which not only pushed it to enter into an alliance with Akali Dal but also forced the party to recruit candidates from the business class thereby making it a party of affluent sections of the scheduled castes (largely Ad-Dharmis) who were not willing to look at the relatively poorer sections of the scheduled castes.

The scheduled caste community also felt BSP concentrated its energies mainly on mobilization in Uttar Pradesh and framed its policies keeping Uttar Pradesh in mind rather than Punjab. This seemed natural given the fact that Uttar Pradesh has more parliamentary seats than Punjab. Further, after the election of 2007, Pawan Tinoo, a prominent leader of the BSP was ousted from the political leadership that again led Ad-Dharmis to withdraw their support from the BSP.

In addition, the failure of the BSP to realize that the successes of the BSP in Punjab depended on altogether different ideology as compared to the other states played a part. While BSP proclaimed 'Ambedkarism', 'social transformation' and 'economic emancipation' were important aspects of its ideology, in Punjab much more was needed as the hardships related to the caste systems are mainly absent and economically, the group is not as oppressed as compared to their counterparts in other states. The decline of BSP can also be understood by the fact that the Akali Dal and Congress have much longer history of existence and through their cells/committees, mainstream parties have worked for the upliftment of the scheduled castes. The failure of the BSP to capitalize on the Talhan conflict issue and its failure to intervene in the cases of the caste conflicts led the major scheduled castes communities to abandon their support to the BSP.

An important factor for the rise of BSP in UP and its decline in Punjab is that in Uttar Pradesh the dalits have a huge army of government employees. Speaking on this phenomena Vivek Kumar states "If we compare the size of the bureaucracy, Uttar Pradesh has the biggest net of bureaucracy amongst the states, which have a 20 percent or more of dalit population, which is about 8 lakhs. Moreover, if we look at the percentage of the prescribed and filled reservations, UP has a good record then the other governments which is more than 11 percent. And therefore, if we calculate 11 percent of 8 lakhs than it come out to be the 88 thousand employees of dalits are present in the state. BSP used BAMCEF to organize BSP's movement" (Kumar, 2007:244). The benefits of reservations in Punjab also remained confined only to a set of one *generation of people* as the government banned all the government posts. While special provision exists for providing reservations to the *Mazhabhis*, they have yet not been able to take advantages of the same.

Finally, the failure of BSP in Punjab should be evaluated in the context of lack of social capital - *its failure to initiate grassroots movements or utilize*

panchayats to support political processes at the state level. The failure of BSP to capitalize on *dera* politics or encourage any form of social organization or extra non-political activity led to its failure to emerge as a potential third front.

Third Phase: *Asli Jhadoo Ab Chalega*

2014 and 2017: AAP as third alternative

Post decline of the BSP, the electorate in the state continued to remain split between the SAD and the Congress until the 2014 parliamentary elections, when the emergence of AAP posed a direct challenge to SAD-BJP and the Congress, thereby making it a triangular contest.

The AAP's successful electoral journey in the state of Punjab 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 (Kumar, Kaur and Mahajan, 2018:108-109). Translated into assembly segments, the AAP was ahead of the other parties in 34 out of the 117 assembly constituencies in the state, 18 of them represented by the Akali Dal and 16 by the Congress (Kumar, 2015 :180).

Further, the party emerged as a viable third front in the 2017 state assembly elections when H.S. Phoolka, a senior advocate of the Delhi High Court and known for leading a legal fight for victims of 1984 anti-Sikh riots, joined the Aam Aadmi Party. The 2017 Punjab elections results were remarkable as a large section of Punjabi population, especially the younger generation and lower castes voted in favour of AAP. While the Congress swept to power in Punjab, winning 77 of the 117 seats, the AAP came second with 20 seats. AAP's ally, the Lok Insaaf Party, won another two seats (see Table 9). Phoolka won from the Dakha Assembly constituency following which he was appointed Leader of Opposition in the Punjab Legislative Assembly. AAP had the greatest impact in the Malwa region, historically known to elect governments of Punjab, winning 66 out of 69 seats. The impact of AAP can also be seen among the lower castes as dalits votes continued to be split between AAP and mainstream parties. As a result of the emergence of AAP and the Lok Insaaf Party, Congress vote share came down with AAP managing to divert a substantial number of dalit votes (21 percent). The Aam Aadmi Party, similar to Congress and SAD continued the tradition of visiting *deras*, which are home to the vast majority of Dalits. Arvind Kejriwal regularly visited Dera Sachkhand Ballan that contributes to 23 out of the 117 seats to the Punjab Legislative Assembly (Kaushal, 2017). Because of rigorous campaigning among dalits, the Congress lost 10 per cent of its vote share among dalit Sikhs, winning 41 per cent in 2017 against the 51 per cent it garnered in 2012 or the 49 per cent it secured in 2007, while the AAP made an impressive in-road with 19 per cent of this vote share. (Yadav, 2021).

Table 9: Seats won by major parties in 2017 assembly elections

Year	Congress	SAD	BJP	CPI	BSP	AAP
2017	77	15	3	0	0	20

Source: Election reports

Table 10: How dalits voted in Assembly elections 2017

Dalit Sikh vote (%)				Dalit Hindu		
Year	Congress	SAD+BJP	AAP	Congress	SAD+BJP	AAP
2017	41	34	19	43	26	21

Source: Kumar (2021) 'Punjab Congress and caste vote', *Indian Express*, August 3.

The successes of AAP in Punjab also stemmed out from its ability to project itself as a 'Common Man Party'. Second, AAP, unlike other 'new' parties that cropped up in the state, such as Punjab Peoples Party, was 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 (Kumar, Kaur and Mahajan, 2018: 116). Finally, AAP was successful in pushing its support among the lower castes and its Delhi model of government throughout the entirety of its campaign in Punjab. The party's successful and popular programmes in Delhi in the areas of education, health, power, etc. provided comfort to the population of a state suffering from poor governance.

Hence, AAP disassociated itself from state's mainstream parties or made a determined effort to reach out to broader electorates, breaking through long-standing patterns of party alignments and existing social cleavages. By speaking out against corruption at higher places and the drugs trade, Kejriwal helped the party garner a lot of support and popularity in the state.

2019 elections

The most significant developments of the 2019 election in Punjab was first the unprecedented victory of the Congress which made the state an outlier in almost entire India except for Kerala. Second notable feature was the significant loss of the support of the traditional Sikh Jat community for the Akali Dal as the party wavered from its age-old *panthic* agenda. Third, this time, AAP, that had emerged as a viable third force in the 2017 elections really struggled to keep its place in the electoral politics of the state. AAP could only win one seat and its vote share declined from 24.40 per cent in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls to 7.38 per cent in 2019 (see Table 11).

AAP's reputation suffered after Mr. Phoolka left the party amid rumours of a potential merger with the Congress for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Frequent splits and disputes left AAP in total disarray. 8 of the 13 candidates could not garner even 5% of the votes in their respective constituencies. Decision-making issues surfaced, and suspension of the state's Chief Executive, Sucha Singh Chhotepur, in 2016, made matters worse.

Despite its unexpected rise in Punjab, AAP failed to capitalize on the interaction between politics and religion in the state and continued to focus on matters of governance. Arvind Kejriwal, the national convener of the AAP, attempted to boost the election campaign during the last leg of voting. At a Barnala rally, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) established the tone for its '3-D formula', which involved attracting dalits, showing and development through its Delhi model of administration, and public confession of drinking habit of its state convener Bhagwant Mann. Kejriwal's speech during the rally, held on January 20, mainly focused on the dalits, recounting the welfare measures that his government had taken for dalits in Delhi, while announcing more. 'We have now planned that Delhi government would bear expenditure of private coaching for children of dalit community' (PTI, 2019). Additionally, the party attempted to form an alliance with the Bahujan Samaj Party to gain dalit votes.

However, AAP's constant invitation to the national parties to contest the polls in alliance disillusioned the voters as they conceived it to be like any other political party succumbing to electoral pressures rather than being a 'third' political force representing change. The results of elections suggest that, except for Sangrur where Bhagwant Mann won, in other constituencies people were largely unenthusiastic of the vision of 'alternative politics' floated by AAP.

Table 11 Comparing Vote Share of Parties in Parliamentary Elections

Party Name	Vote Share 2014 (%)	Vote Share 2019 (%)
INC	33.10	40.12
SAD	26.30	27.76
BJP	8.70	9.63
AAP	24.40	7.38

Source: Compiled from Election Reports.

2022 Elections: *Mauka to AAP and Badlav in Punjab*

Following its drop in 2019 elections, AAP recorded a landslide win in Punjab, claiming 92 of 117 assembly seats and leaving the Congress only 18 seats (Srinivasan, 2022). Even the SAD suffered a major setback as it could only win three seats while its alliance partner, BSP, could only win one seat. The BJP-Punjab Lok Congress-SAD(Sanyukt) failed to leave any mark as BJP won only 2 seats and rest of its partners failed to even open an account.

Factionalism in the Congress party, with Punjab Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi and Punjab Congress chief Navjot Singh Sidhu fighting it out to be the chief ministerial face of the Congress led to shrinking of its constituency.

State politics has also been affected by the year-long farmers' movement against the three contentious agriculture policies. The Congress skillfully avoided the farmers' fury by verbally endorsing the cause without getting personally involved thereby upsetting the voters. Akali Dal's breakup with the BJP (a strong alliance dating back to the 1990s), led to it losing support of its primary social constituency, the Jat Sikh landed peasants. The Akali

Dal image also suffered in given its historical claim to be a farmers' party given its initial support for the farm laws. The agrarian crisis leading to farmer suicides, their continuing indebtedness and problems in procurement of foodgrains also tarnished the pro-farmer image of the Akalis.

The farmers movement also led to the formation of the Samyukta Samaj Morcha (SSM) by 22 farmers' unions - the first such political initiative by the landowning Jat Sikh farmers in the State, leading to multi-cornered contested elections. *The morcha* lost from all 117 seats it fought. prominent leaders, such as Balbir Singh Rajewal and Prem Singh Bhangu failed to make any impact.

AAP landslide victory could be attributed to its spectacular performance in the Malwa region, the centre of farmer agitation. The Malwa region has been the centre of farmers movement and agitation protesting not only within the state but also in Delhi. As we can see from Table 12, Lokniti's post poll survey found that even as the AAP had a huge lead over its opponents among both farmers and those not connected with farming, it did slightly better among the farming community receiving 43% of their support. Henceforth, although the farmers' movement did play an important role in cornering votes for AAP, its impact was limited only to the Malwa sub-region as it was the main centre of protest against farm laws passed by the Union government.

Table 12: AAP swept both the pro-farmer and anti-farmer movement sentiments among the farmers

Voters of households that....	Congress	SAD+	BJP+	AAP	Others
supported farmer movements (84%)	19	24	4	43	10
Opposed farmer movements (13%)	19	19	8	51	3
Non Committal (3%)	27	12	22	32	7

Source: Shreyas Sardesai, Sandeep Shastri and Amir Raza (2022): 'Farmers Movement a catalyst for change', March 13, *The Hindu*.

Anti-incumbency against traditional parties (Congress, SAD, BJP) made AAP the obvious choice for voters who were looking for *badlav* (change). Dissatisfaction with the Congress government (58%) and unpopularity of the SAD-BJP government influenced the electoral verdict. So strong was the desire of change that one-third of the previous supporters of dominant traditional parties voted for AAP this time (Lokniti-CSDS Poll, Table13 below).

Table 13: Voters dissatisfaction with Earlier governments

Indicator	Congress government Five years	Modi Government three years
Fully satisfied	8	10
Somewhat satisfied	14	15
Somewhat dissatisfied	17	16
Fully dissatisfied	58	53
No response	3	6

Source: Sandeep Shastri (2022): ‘An angry Punjab votes for change’, March 13, *The Hindu*.

People interest in AAP campaign promising quality health and educational services on the lines of Delhi, overrode politics of caste, regionalism and *Deras* contributing to AAP’s resounding victory. On one hand, appointment of Bhagwant Singh Mann as the CM face, helped to consolidate vote in the crucial Malwa region, on the other, the AAP slogan ‘Ek Mauka Kejriwal Nu’ to resurrect Punjab extended its appeal beyond Malwa. It reiterated its pledges for better public schools, less expensive electricity, and enhanced healthcare. Offering freebies like scooter for girls and monthly allowances for kids passing the class 12 examination were also attempts made by both the SAD and the Congress, but the freebies were seemingly added on at the last minute.

Development and Change were two important voting determinants, according to the survey. The entire campaign of AAP centered around *mauka* and *badlav* was cited by one-fifth of the respondents as a major factor of voting. Against the dismal performance of the two main parties, SAD and Congress, and overall dissatisfaction with both the state and centre governments, half of the respondents of CSDS-Lokniti Post poll survey considered development as the main issue as can be seen from table 14 below.

Table 14: Most Important Voting Issues

Indicators	Congress	BJP+	SAD+	AAP
Development	28	10	21	35
Chance to the new government or change the government	2	3	13	76
Work done by the government	44	6	28	17
Unemployment	23	11	15	47
Price Rise	22	8	27	29

Source: Jyoti Mishra and Jatinder Singh (2022) ‘Development and Change were two important voting Determinants’, *The Hindu*.

The data from the Lokniti-CSDS post poll survey also suggests that AAP could get support across all castes and communities. Neither the appointment of Channi, nor the SAD-BSP alliance could lure the dalit voters. Mann ran a targeted campaign for different demographics of voters, pledging employment to youth, welfare schemes for women, agri-reforms for farmers. Bhagwant Mann’s popularity can be gauged from the fact that close to a third of previous supporters from the earlier main parties - Congress and SAD, also chose him over Channi and Badals respectively (Lokniti-CSDS). The survey indicates nearly two in every five voters spontaneously backed Mann after being asked whom they would like to see the next CM. The survey also found that Mann outperformed Channi across all castes and communities except Hindu dalits who voted for the latter. Tables 15 and 16 below shows the survey results for Mann’s popularity and party voting preferences of different castes and communities. Jat Sikhs, OBC Sikhs and dalit Sikhs all came out to choose Mann over Channi. His background of being a Jat, his candidature from Malwa region and his welfarist agenda all came handy to woo Sikhs from all the respective castes.

Table 15: Mann’s popularity over Channi

Jat Sikh	+27
Khatri Sikh	0
Dalit Sikh	+17
OBC Sikh	+36
Hindu Upper Caste	+6
Hindu OBC	+8
Hindu SC	-10

Source: Manjesh Rana and Varun Goel (2022): ‘Riding on AAP’s wave, Mann gets edge over Channi’, March 13, *The Hindu*.

Table 16: How caste and communities voted in 2022 (%)

Caste Group	Congress	SAD	AAP	BJP
Hindu Upper	24	15	35	20
Hindu OBC	24	17	41	16
Hindu SC	32	22	32	10
Muslim	33	14	39	2
Jat Sikh	16	26	46	2
Khatri Sikh	24	19	36	-
Dalit Sikh	27	18	46	3
OBC Sikh	17	14	56	3
Others	25	18	45	5

Source: Jagroop Kaur and Jyoti Mishra (2022) 'AAP wave rises on support from all castes, communities', March 13, *The Hindu*.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, the region has seen an early emergence of an independent third political formation in the state of Punjab. The overwhelming popularity of the Congress, longer years of existence of Congress and Shiromani Akali Dal, blurring of religion and caste and close affiliation of the scheduled castes to Sikhism, led scheduled castes groups to either vote for Akali Dal or Congress, limited the chances of third front to garner successes. On the other hand, lack of a strong leadership, formation of opportunistic alliances and inability of the third front to evolve an ideology suiting the specific interests of scheduled castes in the state, further led to decline in their popularity and support till 2014 when finally, AAP appealed to a wider electorate and emerged as a viable third force in the state. The emergence of third front forces have had important consequences for electoral politics in Punjab. First, their emergence led to a shift in the state party system from a stable bi-party system towards a culture of forming alliances. While the BSP evolved the policy of building coalitions with major parties like the Congress and Akali Dal which also led to its decline, AAP contested elections alone directly against mainstream parties. Second, the growing importance of third front parties have compelled even political formations the like Akali Dal to shift their agenda from the religious towards more general socio-economic issues such as unemployment, rising state debt, illegal sand mining, liquor and drug menace, farmer laws, education etc.

The stable two-party system political landscape of Punjab has certainly now become more complex with multi-cornered contests with the rise of AAP. Irrespective of how AAP performs over the longer term, we can say Punjab is headed for 'little badlav'!!.

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