

## The 2024 Parliamentary Elections and Punjab Politics: Commonalities, Exceptionalism, and Takeaways

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The present article<sup>1</sup> discusses the politics of Punjab, a constituent state of Indian Union, especially its electoral aspect, with focus on the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The article argues that a longer view of the state's electoral politics reveals that Punjab, like other states, discerns its own set of 'exceptionalisms'. At the same time, it also shows some of the long-term electoral trends, which have been visible across other Indian states. The article further discusses the recent 2024 parliamentary elections results in the state. While doing so, the article explores whether the long-term trends of state politics were visible in the elections and how Punjab remains an outlier when compared to other states, especially the neighbouring ones.

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### Introduction

Sifting through the academic writings on Indian politics in the last three and half decades, one finds greater recognition and acceptance of the constituent states as analytical units. Arguably, states in the Indian union may qualify as 'mini-democracies', given their distinct nature of politics (Jenkins, 2004: 3). This can be attributed mainly to the following two factors. First, the upsurge in identity politics has reconfigured the democratic politics of India in the recent decades as it has taken roots. Diverse groups in India have increasingly been politicised and mobilised on the basis of social cleavages rather than on the basis of their common economic interests or ideology. The reorganisation of the states in the late fifties and sixties on the basis of language, culture, and then on the basis of ethnicity in the 1970s helped in consolidating state-based regional identities. Also, the seven and half decades of almost uninterrupted electoral democracy, which has witnessed increased level of participation and contestation, have helped the process of ethnic mobilisation. Second,

the on going transition from the planned economy to the market-oriented economy since early nineties has brought focus on the constituent states as economic actors, even as the central state continues to play an important role. Growing regional imbalances and resultant perceptions of discrimination and deprivation in the wake of economic reforms has further accentuated regional identities.

Significant political and economic transitions over the last three and half decades have witnessed each and every state, and the sub-state regions within them, gradually acquiring their own set of political specificities, giving credentials to the 'exceptionalism' thesis in state politics literature. This process of regionalisation of politics has received further impetus with the rise of regionally located/regionalist parties and the regionally rooted leaders, filling in the void created due to the decline of national parties, especially the erstwhile dominant Congress. The situation on the ground has not changed much, even after the advent of the BJP, a centralist party, as an electorally dominant party in the states of the north, west and central India. It explains as to why states have emerged as the preferred analytical units for the study of politics in contemporary times instead of attempting 'all-India' based studies, as was the norm in the first four decades under the Congress 'system'.

However, despite the emergence of the state as a relatively autonomous analytical unit, and the state-specific nature of politics drawing scholarly attention, a careful study of the emerging trends in 'all-India' politics does reveal certain commonalities across the constituent states, who are governed by the same constitutional-legal structure within the Indian Union and are also under the same economic order. The presence of polity-wide parties, which contest not only state level elections but also local government elections, also show how the state/sub-state level politics and national politics remain connected.

### **What are the Commonalities?**

First, like in the case of other states, three historical, socially, and culturally constituted regions namely, *Malwa*, *Doaba* and *Majha*,<sup>2</sup> have emerged in the state as electoral regions over the last six decades of its reorganisation, each having its own electoral specificities in terms of issues, electoral choices, and leadership.<sup>3</sup>

Second, in Punjab there has been a long-term legacy of politicisation of social cleavages. Like in other states, caste, kinship, region, language and

religion have all shaped the dynamics of party competition in the state in some or other ways. Amongst all the bases of political identity, religion and language have played a much more important role. These two factors were behind the Punjabi Suba movement in the fifties and sixties, followed by several *Dharam Yudh Morchas* ('righteous war') in the turbulent 1980s. Sikh identity-based demands were at the core of the Anandpur Sahib Resolutions. Resolutions veered around two main demands: first, recognition of Sikh community constituting a distinct nation (*Qaum*); and second, the autonomy of the constituent states vis-à-vis the centre (Singh, 2007: 559-60).

Third, for long decades, Punjab witnessed a stable electoral bipolarity like most of the states in India (with a few notable exceptions like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh). Political power alternated between the Congress and SAD-BJP electoral alliance during 1997-2022, the sole exception being the 2012 elections. Even before the 1997 assembly election, which saw the Akali Dal and BJP coming together against the Congress, there were electoral alliances, especially after reorganisation of the state in 1966. The alliances were stitched between the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and the Akali Dal or Akali Dal-Janata Party to contest the Congress, which has always had a decent support base among the Hindus and Sikhs and also in urban and rural areas.<sup>4</sup> The three-party system emerged with the emergence of the AAP as the main opposition party in the 2017 elections. The breakdown of the Akali Dal-BJP alliance in 2021 has now made it a quadruple contest at the moment, so bringing in 'Punjab exceptionalism'.

Fourth, the state has been witness to what can be termed as the unveiling of a process of 'federalisation' of the party system in the sense that the Akali Dal, a regionalist party, remained the dominant partner in a coalitional arrangement with the BJP/ Bharatiya Jana Sangh that lasted for long decades. For long, the Akali Dal has been setting the political agenda of the state. If one divides the following four distinctive periods of movement politics in post-partition Punjab: Punjabi Suba movement (1950-1966); radical peasant movement (1967-1979); Sikh militancy (1980-1995), the Akali Dal in one or another way had a role to play. End of militancy marked the beginning of the fourth phase, which witnessed the shift in state politics from radical ethnic agenda to peace agenda based on the communal harmony in the next two decades. Of late, the politics of the state has veered around the issue of development and clean and effective governance.

Fifth, with the 'patrimonial' mode of democratic politics on the ascent, especially in the last decade of the BJP dominance, Punjab has also been witness to the rise of competitive populism as the contending parties (Congress being very much part) in a closely contested electoral arena have routinely indulged in patronage, clientelism and hollow promises that go by the name of 'new' welfare for securing votes. This is despite the precarious state of the state's economy. Reading the manifestos of the parties released on the eve of elections reveals tall promises being made by all.

### **Explaining Punjab 'Exceptionalism'**

First, unlike the Hindi-speaking states of the North, which have been experiencing a transfer of political power from the upper castes to the middle/ dominant castes through electoral route,<sup>5</sup> on the footsteps of 'movement politics' states of South India like Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the social structure of political power in Punjab has remained skewed. Punjab is one state where, despite nearly a third of its population belonging to the scheduled castes, the social basis of power has remained with the numerically strong, land-owning Jat Sikh peasantry (Judge, 2012: 18).<sup>6</sup> The near absence of socially marginal castes, especially scheduled castes, in positions of political power in the state<sup>7</sup> can be attributed to the following three factors: First, given the skewed nature of land relations, scheduled castes, which constitute one third of the state's population, suffer with the dubious distinction of possessing lowest share of agricultural land in the state, in fact lowest share in the whole of the country (2.34 per cent). Scheduled castes cultivate only 0.4 per cent of all landholdings and own merely 0.72 per cent of the cultivable land in the state (Ram, 2004: 898; Singh, 2012: 22).<sup>8</sup> Second, social cleavages come in the way of collective mobilisation of the scheduled castes for electoral purposes. They also reflect on the electoral choices of the communities, precluding the possibility of the emergence of an effective party leadership having a lower-caste base (Judge, 2012: 18). The decimation of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in the state, a party with a broad scheduled castes support base, which had a decent electoral start in the early nineties in the state with the victory of the party's founder Kanshi Ram from an unreserved Lok Sabha constituency of Ropar in the 1991 elections, is a pertinent example. Besides, being divided on the basis of caste, varying religious allegiance within the heterogeneous scheduled castes— adhering to

Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Hinduism - as well as varying sects/deras comes in the way of mobilisation of the scheduled castes community as a homogenous 'voting community'. Third, what allowed the SAD, a Jat Sikh dominated party since the late fifties, to achieve success in masking the inner fault-lines on caste lines within the Sikh community was its ability to invoke the narratives of the past Sikh struggles and sacrifices and the use of religious symbols. All Akali movements were launched in the name of the *panthic* interests.

Second, the party system in the state, even in the early years after independence, could never be characterised as under Congress dominance in the sense that, unlike other states, the party always faced stiff competition from Akali Dal and Bharatiya Jana Sangh in the first two decades of independence. This became more visible after the reorganisation of the state in 1966, as evident in the frequency of the formation of coalition governments.

Third, the BJP, like the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in its earlier avatar, was not able to mark its electoral presence in Punjab despite being in alliance with the Akali Dal during 1997-2021, be it in terms of seats or percentage of the votes polled. This is unlike other states where the BJP, finding itself weak, first entered into an alliance with a locally powerful regional party as a junior ally, and then went on to become a winnable party.<sup>9</sup>

Fourth, Punjab has never been swayed by the 'national constituency phenomenon', attempted earlier by the Congress and now by the BJP, both polity-wide parties. The latter's repeated attempts to contest elections on national issues like national security, Article 370, citizenship, the exalted status of India on the global stage, has not cut much ice in the state. On the contrary, even in the Lok Sabha elections, local issues like drugs, mafia hold, the farming sector distress, have remained decisive.

Fifth, at a time when there has been a growing perception about a large-scale ideological shift from middle to right-wing conservatism, visible in the ascendance of cultural nationalism in the plains and hills of north, central and western India, Punjab again seems immune from it, despite having a sizeable Hindu population.

Sixth, unlike several states where 'regionalist' if not 'regionally located' parties - 'those that advance regional specific messages' - have managed to do reasonably well, Punjab has bucked even this trend in the last two Lok Sabha and Assembly elections (Ziegfeld, 2024). Akali Dal, more than a 100-year-old ethno-regional party that may be credited with setting the political agenda of the state even in colonial Punjab and claims

to be the sole representative of Sikh community interests, seems to be in perpetual decline, and that too not because of the BJP, but due to its own tactical mistakes and organisational/leadership issues.

### **The 2024 Parliamentary Elections in Punjab**

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections verdict was watched closely by analysts for several reasons, including the following ones.

First, there was this big question before the election whether Punjab would remain an outlier in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections like in case of the 2014 and 2019 elections when the BJP, riding on the 'Modi Wave', swept all the neighbouring Hindi speaking states like Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand (Kumar, 2024, 25 May, 2024).

Second, after a gap of 27 years, the BJP, which used to be the Akali Dal's junior partner, was contesting alone for the first time in the state, in any election either for the Lok Sabha or for the Vidhan Sabha. So, the focus was naturally on the party's performance, especially in urban constituencies like Ludhiana and Jalandhar, which have a significant Hindu presence, given the party's traditional support among the urban caste Hindus in the state from the Jana Sangh days. Then, there were constituencies where the BJP, in alliance with the Akali Dal, had secured victories in the past: Gurdaspur and Hoshiarpur (5 times) and Amritsar (3 times). The performance of the party in these constituencies was also on the watch list as it was going to be indicative of the BJP performance in the forthcoming 2029 assembly elections.

Third, there was focus in this election on the beleaguered Akali Dal performance, as another loss was going to severely dent the party, top leadership of the Badal family, as well raising the question mark about the party's ability to remain an effective party in a state where it used to set the political agenda not long ago. Since 1997 this was the first election the party was contesting in the absence of Parkash Singh Badal. It was very much on the cards that the dissident voices would rise against the Sukhbir Badal leadership.

Fourth, there was also a question mark about the ability of the AAP to repeat its stupendous performance in the 2022 assembly elections. It was going to be an evaluation of the performance of the party, which had been in power in the state for the last two years. Along with the party, the leadership of Bhagwant Mann was also on test because he led the party campaign in the absence of the party's top three leaders, who were in jail

for most of the campaign period. His challenge had increased because the party was contesting alone as the AAP-Congress alliance did not happen in the state, unlike in Delhi and neighbouring Haryana.

Fifth, there was also a question mark about Congress party's ability to make a comeback under a collective leadership. After losing the 2022 elections, the party faced several defections and also many of its top leaders, including Charanjit Singh Channi, who was a short-term Chief Minister before the 2022 assembly elections, were facing corruption charges. So, it was a test for the collective leadership, which was led by a youthful state unit president, Amarinder Singh Raja Warring. This was an election, which saw the 'new' leadership pitted against 'old' leadership. The erstwhile top leaders of the party like Captain Amarinder Singh, Sunil Jakhar, and Ravneet Singh Bittu, along with many other leaders, had left the party to join the BJP.

#### **Electoral Verdict: The 2024 Elections in Punjab**

The Congress won seven out of 13 seats in the quadrangular contest as compared to eight seats in the 2019 elections, receiving only 13.82 per cent less votes, compared to the 2019 elections. The incumbent AAP managed to win only three seats, which was, however, better than the one seat won by the party last time. Also, the party gained by polling 18.64 per cent more votes compared with the last time. The Akali Dal could win only one seat, as compared to two seats last time, while 10 of its 13 candidates lost their security deposits. It suffered a loss of 14.03 per cent of the votes, its worst electoral performance. The Congress' comparative success could be attributed to the following possible factors.

First, there was apparently an element of disillusionment amongst the voters against the incumbent AAP government. Arguably, the very fact that the Congress decided not to have an alliance with the AAP helped the party, as anti-incumbency votes apparently went to it rather than getting scattered. Also, the alliance, even if forced from above by the party's high command, would not have worked in mutual transfer of votes due to a great degree of animosity between the state units of the two parties. The state unit of the Congress party was vehemently opposed to any alliance with AAP.

Second, what went in favour of the Congress was the repeat of its time-tested strategy of putting up its faction leaders as party contestants so that there was no internecine undercutting. The party's state unit President

Warring, former Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi, and former senior minister Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa all won their seats. In comparison, AAP, the main contender, had relatively inexperienced candidates and were overly dependent on Mann's leadership.

Third, angst amongst farmers, well-organised and mostly belonging to the numerically strong land-holding Jat-Sikh community, against the party in power at the centre did help the Congress as, unlike the Akali Dal, it had consistently extended its support to the on-going agitation, even on the now defunct three farm bills earlier.

Fourth, the Congress campaign strongly invoked the message of inter-community fraternity that did endear the party to the electorate. Rahul Gandhi's visits to the Golden Temple and doing community service endeared him to the Sikh masses. Those who were opposed to the right-wing majoritarian politics of the BJP saw in the Congress a viable alternative.

Fifth, past surveys and electoral results have clearly shown that the party has always received decent support from both the Hindu and Sikh communities belonging to all the three regions of the state, and this election was no different, as the CSDS-Lokniti post-poll data shows.

### **Dissecting the Verdict: What Does it Augur for the Future?**

There are many takeaways as one dissects the verdict closely (Kumar, 2024a). The verdict has raised the ominous spectre of the troubled past of the borderland state which saw the insurgency in the eighties that caused immense damage to human and material resources of the state. The concern can be primarily attributed to the unexpected victories of two independent candidates, Amritpal Singh and Sarabjit Singh Khalsa respectively, from the Khadoor Sahib and Faridkot constituencies with impressive margins. Amritpal Singh defeated the Congress candidate by a margin of 1,97,120 votes whilst Sarabjit Singh Khalsa defeated the AAP candidate by a margin of 70,053 votes. The twin wins were preceded by the victory of the Akali Dal (Amritsar) leader Simranjit Singh Mann, a hardliner, in the by-election held in Sangrur in 2022, soon after Bhagwant Mann vacated the Lok Sabha seat. Like Mann, both the winning candidates have been associated unmistakably with the idea of separatism. Their wins were a grim reminder of a segment of the Sikh electorates still harbouring the wounded psyche, a result of decades-old unfulfilled demands, and the unfortunate events that happened in the



dark days of militancy. One can refer in this regard the demands that have remained unmet like the status of Chandigarh and release of the radical Sikhs incarnated in jail for years. The radical Sikh groups have been trying to inculcate pro-minority psychosis among the Sikhs, which is fuelled by the rise of majoritarian cultural nationalism in the rest of India. The farmers' movement has also resurrected anti-Delhi sentiment in a big way. There is a popular feeling among the farmers being wronged. Farmers feel that when the country was facing severe food grains deficit in the sixties, it were they who laboured hard to 'feed the country'. And, now when the same farmers and their progenies face existential crisis due to the rising cultivating costs, they have been left to fend for themselves. The state has faced farmers' suicides due to rising indebtedness and cash crops failures in the recent decades. In addition, the folklores, the wars in medieval period in which the community and its holy places were targeted, and the tragic events in the modern period, which all reinforce it. There is also a growing demographic anxiety due to the large-scale immigration of Sikh youth to the greener pastures in the west and an influx of the working class Hindu migrants. Of late, they have been settling down in the state rather than being seasonal labourers, as in the early years of the green revolution. The separatist elements among the Sikh diaspora in the western countries, especially in Canada, play a role also in promoting radicalism, especially among the youth who are enamoured by the west.

Also, and probably more correctly, the twin wins of separatists could be attributed to people's growing alienation from the mainstream parties, especially the ones who have been in power. The political class is widely blamed for the mess along with the centre. The youth of Punjab, increasingly found in protests, be it of farmers or of students in university campuses are an angry lot. They have suffered due to the dismal state of the education sector which makes them unemployable, and lack of employment opportunities. And, like their parents, the youth have also seen in their lifetime, the once prosperous state being gradually pushed into deeper social, economic, and environmental crisis by a reckless and corrupt political class. The continued prevalence of drugs, illegal and illicit practices by mafias, gangsters involved in extortions, has all inculcated a sense of hopelessness, making the youth vulnerable to radical propaganda.

The verdict has drawn attention towards the future of the Akali Dal, the oldest state level party in India, which is not just another party. The

hundred-year-old party has shaped the politics of Punjab, like in the case of the DMK in Tamil Nadu and National Conference in Jammu and Kashmir respectively. Its steady decline in both organisational and ideological terms and turning from a cadre-based party to a one family party in the new millennium was very much on evidence, in its solitary win, that in Bathinda, the traditional home turf of the Badal family. In the recent by-elections for the assembly seats in Jalandhar West, the party candidate could poll only 1,242 votes after she was disowned by her own party. The seat was won by the AAP. Senior leaders like Prem Singh Chandumajra, former SGPC chief Bibi Jagir Kaur, Parminder Singh Dhindsa and many others, have challenged Sukhbir Badal's leadership within the party. While many rebel leaders have appeared physically before the Akal Takht, the highest temporal set of the Sikhs, asking forgiveness for the mistakes committed by the Akali Dal while in power between 2007 and 2012, the party president Sukhbir Badal, under pressure, has also written to the Akal Takht, asking for 'unconditional forgiveness' for 'all mistakes' committed under his leadership. The Akali Dal decline may be considered a bad omen for state politics as its ability to represent the panthic constituency has diminished, which makes it possible for the radical elements, so far relegated to the fringe since Badal senior, to re-emerge. The Badal leadership, for quite some time, has been under pressure and there is a lurking danger that Akali Dal, so far in control of the SGPC and the Akal Takht, the other two pillars of Sikh politics, would be tempted to resort to taking a hard-line on panthic issues to counter the rise of radical Akali factions, as happened in the past (Kumar, 2024). The party decided not to fight the four assembly by-elections held in the month of November 2024, fearing certain defeats. However, the party's official stand was that it did so to show the solidarity with its leader Sukhbir Badal who has been declared 'tankhaiya' for 'religious misconduct' by the Akal Takht.

As for the dismal performance of the AAP, it also raises a question mark over the 2012 party ambition to become a national party, to emerge as challenger to the BJP. Punjab is the only state where the party has registered wins in the Lok Sabha elections since its inception in 2012. As early as the 2014 elections, the party had won four out of thirteen seats. It went on to become the main opposition party in the 2017 assembly elections, and then registered an unprecedented win of 92 out of 117 seats in the 2022 election. The party in the quadrangular contest received 26.02 per cent of the votes polled compared to the Congress, which polled 26.30

per cent, showing that the party was not down and out. The outcome, however, reflected a serious disappointment on Mann government's performance, especially if one considers its spectacular performance in the assembly elections, held only two years back. The party, since its entry into the state in the 2014 elections, has been promising to end mafia-infused loot of the state's natural resources, corruption, violence perpetrated by gangsters, and most importantly the drug menace. Even its promise of replicating its 'Delhi model' of rejuvenating the education and health sectors has not been redeemed substantially. The party once again sought votes based on its tall populist campaign promises that are bound to remain mostly unfulfilled in a state which is so heavily indebted. The government has been unable to stall the free-fall of state's farm-sector based economy.

The BJP, contesting alone in Punjab after 27 years following its breakup with the Akali Dal, as mentioned above, was unable to win even a single seat. It, however, polled 18.4 per cent of the vote, larger than its erstwhile senior ally, the Akali Dal, which managed only 13.53 per cent of votes polled. It was also a gain of 8.93 per cent in terms of votes polled than in the 2019 elections. The party was runner-up in urban constituencies like Ludhiana and Jalandhar, which have a significant Hindu presence, besides Gurdaspur, which was won by the party last time. However, the party failed even to come second in Hoshiarpur, which it had won in the 2014 and 2019 elections. The party was runner-up in the Jalandhar West assembly by-election held recently. In the 2027 elections, the party probably hopes to perform better, as the electorate in Punjab have been constantly looking for a viable political alternative. As per the 2011 census, there are many districts, other than the ones mentioned above, where Hindus constitute more than 40 per cent of the population, namely Nawanshahr, Mohali, Rupnagar, Patiala, Kapurthala and Firozepur. Besides its capacity to mobilise the Hindu vote, the BJP has other comparative advantages: it has a dedicated karyakarta base, which has ideological clarity. Post-militancy, the party has been able to set up its organisational structure, setting up committees at both Mandals and booth level like in other states. Being in power at the centre for the third consecutive term under the popular leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the party is resourceful in both human and material resources. In a state where there are 39.83 million telecom subscribers, 83 Internet subscribers for every 100 residents, the BJP seems to have a comparative advantage over its rivals in the long run, thanks to its strong

social media cell and control over electronic media. However, given the fact that the Congress continues to poll sizeable Hindu votes and also the community is divided along caste lines, the BJP, if it aspires to win election on its own, needs to mend its relations with the powerful landed peasantry, shedding its pro-urban/pro-corporate image. The party also needs to desist from invoking strident majoritarian Hindutva politics. The party also has to take a clear stand over issues concerning Punjab, like river water issue and the status of Chandigarh, among others.

### **CSDS Post-Poll Survey**

The CSDS survey was conducted in four Lok Sabha constituencies of Punjab, namely Ludhiana, Faridkot, Firozpur, and Sangrur. The post-poll data shows that the electorate voted for both the candidates and parties while making their voting choices. The BJP asking for a vote in the name of Prime Minister Modi did not cut much ice with the voters. The opposition parties raising the issue of saving the constitution and protecting the rights of citizens found an echo amongst the voters, especially of minorities in the Sikh majority state. 86 per cent of the voters interviewed reported saying that the government was duty bound to protect the rights of minorities, even if the majority community does not approve it. While a significant 44 per cent of the respondents considered the citizen's right to change the government as an important political right, 40 per cent prioritised equal rights for every citizen. The role of social media was found significant during the election campaign as 51 per cent of the respondents interviewed reported being contacted by political parties through WhatsApp, text messages and on X (Twitter). Political rallies, processions, and plays, which used to be the hallmark of state level campaigns, were surprisingly much fewer during the campaign. Nine out of ten respondents reported not being part of these activities. More than half of the respondents reported being dissatisfied with the performance of the BJP-led NDA government at the centre, with high prices of basic commodities and high level of unemployment being the main causing factors.

As for voting preferences, the survey data revealed that the AAP had a comparative advantage over the other parties amongst the rural voters, as every third rural voter reported voting for AAP. The AAP gain is at the cost of the Akali Dal, a self-proclaimed party of farmers. The Congress and BJP competed for the urban votes. Every third urban voter

interviewed reported voting for the BJP, giving an advantage to the party. More than half (56 per cent) Hindu upper caste voters preferred the BJP. However, the Congress was able to retain its social support base amongst both the Sikh (including the Jat Sikhs, considered traditional Akali supporters) and Hindu voters across the urban and rural regions, especially the scheduled castes and backward castes (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Caste/Community Wise Voting Preferences: 2024 Punjab Lok Sabha Elections (in Percentage)**

	Party Voted for Lok Sabha 2024				
	Congress	BJP	AAP	Akali Dal	Others
Hindu Upper Caste	21	56	13	2	8
Hindu Dalit	32	23	24	1	21
Jat Sikh	21	5	30	25	19
Dalit Sikh	31	6	38	13	12
OBC Sikh	39	7	32	14	7
Sikh Rest	21	12	26	15	26

Source: CSDS Data Unit

### Some Conclusions

The continued decline of the Akali Dal and the impressive wins of two candidates who have been linked with separatist politics, as discussed above, raises deep concern about the political future of the borderland state with a troubled past. A weakened and much discredited Akali leadership, engaged in internecine factional war, is now incapable of accommodating the radical panthic elements within the Sikh community. The other two pillars of the Sikh politics namely SGPC and the Akal Takht have long lost their institutional autonomy. As for Congress, the party seems to be in the recovery mode but as has happened in case of the 2024 assembly elections in Haryana and Maharashtra or in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in 2023, the party has developed the knack of losing winnable elections. The BJP is likely to rise notwithstanding its defeats both in the 2024 Lok Sabha and the four assembly by-elections caused by

the sitting legislators getting elected for the Lok Sabha, but whether it would shun its politics of cultural nationalism laced with religiosity, is something to watch intently. The party also has to take a clear stand on the issues that concern the people of Punjab, especially the Sikhs, as mentioned above. It also needs to shun its image of being anti-farmers. The party also needs state level leadership, as the party's national leaders do not have much traction in the state. At present, its imported leaders from the Congress like Captain Amarinder Singh, Sunil Jakhar or Manpreet Badal, among others, are unable to give traction to the party. Manpreet Badal even lost his security deposit from Gidderbaha, a constituency he represented four times beginning 1995 and which has long been considered the bastion of Badal extended family.

The AAP raised hopes in providing a credible alternative and made tall promises to end drugs, mafias, and corruption besides promising plenty of freebies. Now more than two years in power, the party is facing flack for its limited success on all these fronts. There is a question mark about the autonomy of the Mann government in the state due to perceived interference by the party high command sitting in Delhi. This could be fatal for the party as people in Punjab have an aversion for leaders taking command from the centre so visibly. Even the wins in the three out of four assembly constituencies have not consolidated the leadership position of Mann within the party as incumbent parties have secured victories in the assembly by-elections held in other states as well.

The overall failure of political parties and the leadership in power at present and in the past to resurrect the state's economy and bring an end to illegal and illicit activities has created a deep sense of political alienation among the people, who have been looking desperately for alternatives in recent elections. Arguably, the political class has collectively failed Punjab, once considered the 'progressive' state of India.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised and much expanded version of an article by the author titled 'Punjab Lok Sabha Elections 2024: Discerning the Trends' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 59 (38): 59-62, 21 September 2024.

<https://www.epw.in/journal/2024/38/general-elections-2024/punjab-lok-sabha-elections-2024.html>

<sup>2</sup> It was in Majha region, considered to be the 'cradle of Sikhism' due to the presence of main Sikh shrines and pilgrimage centres associated with the Sikh

Gurus in the region where the autonomist movement gained ground before spreading to Doaba and Malwa region (Deol, 2000, p. 2).

<sup>3</sup> Majha region has three parliamentary constituencies namely Gurdaspur, Amritsar and Khadur Sahib. Doaba region comprises of Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur (both seats are reserved for the SC candidates). Malwa region comprises of Anandpur Sahib, Fatehgarh Sahib, Ludhiana, Patiala, Sangrur, Faridkot, Ferozpur and Bathinda (Fatehgarh Sahib and Faridkot seats are reserved for the SC Candidates).

<sup>4</sup> This was clearly an opportunistic alliance given the ideological difference between the Jana Sangh and the Akali Dal. Jana Sangh had opposed Alai Dal led Punjabi Suba movement. Earlier, along with the Arya Samaj it had also opposed the Akali movement to make Punjabi in Gurmukhi script as the sole state language, ignoring Hindi.

<sup>5</sup> The process has been dubbed as 'silent revolution' with political power 'being transferred, on the whole peacefully, from the upper-caste elites to various subaltern groups... The relative calm... is primarily due to the fact that the whole process is incremental' (Jaffrelot, 2003, p. 494).

<sup>6</sup> Scheduled castes constitute 31.9 percent of the state's population as per the 2011 census, highest in the country. However, scheduled castes are divided not only along the caste lines but also religious lines that result in 'an absence of any visible pattern in their voting behaviour' (Judge 2012, p. 18). There are 39 scheduled castes and the two most numerous castes are Chamars and Churas. Chamars have either remained Hindu or have identified them as Ramdasias or Adi-dharmis.

<sup>7</sup> That Punjab was not yet ready for 'silent revolution', despite its one third population belonging to the scheduled castes, was visible in the Congress leadership's failed last-ditch attempt to fight anti-incumbency by appointing Charanjit Singh Channi, a Dalit, as the chief minister months before the 2022 assembly elections (Kumar 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Underlining the rural-urban divide between the two religious communities, in rural Punjab Sikhs are around 70 percent and Hindus around 29 percent whereas in the urban Punjab the Hindus are around 66 percent and Sikhs are around 31 percent (Corsi, 2006, p. 94).

<sup>9</sup> Odisha, Karnataka, Bihar, and West Bengal are pertinent examples.

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