



Electoral Politics in Punjab, India: A case study of Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad Elections of 2013

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Abstract

Panchayati raj is an integral part of democratic system in India. It represents the dynamism of democratic forces at the grassroots in the polity. The process of panchayat election is in miniature, the electoral process of the national and state level-representative bodies. The electorate participate in the process of these elections with a sense of involvement which they display in the electoral process of the Parliament and the State Assemblies. Therefore the study of the electoral process of the Panchayati Raj institutions is as much indicative of the mood and temper of the electorate as that of the higher level legislative bodies. The May 2013 Panchayat elections were the democratic elections in which voters participated with a sense of involvement. The level of their participation and their voting behaviour could indicate the emerging trends in the people political thinking and their perception of the emerging realities.

Keywords: Electoral politics, panchayat samiti, zila parishad, democratic system, parliament, state assemblies

Introduction

Panchayati raj system is a unique contribution of India to the world. From vedic to the Modern times different dynasties have appeared and disappeared but the village has remained the fundamental unit of local administration. Maharishi Balmik's Ramayana VedVyas' Mahabharata, Kautilya's Arithshastra' Manu.s Manusamriti and Abui Fazal,s Aina Akbari give sufficient proof of the existence of the Panchayat, as a governing body at the village level.

In the early phase of British domination however, the panchayats came under the clouds of suppression. For a brief period of time these institutions became almost paralysed due to the introduction of Zamindari system. Infact the whole of this old and ancient structure tumbled down to the utter misery and poverty¹. In the 18th century the Panchayat system again showed signs of revival in the hands of Lord Mayo and Lord Ripon. Lord Ripon was called

"Father of local self govt." for his resolution of 1882 and his resolution is considered as "Magna carta" of local govt.in India². With this resolution the panchayati raj institutions got a legal status in British India. later on the Acts of 1919,1929 and 1935 contained elaborate provisions for the improvement of Panchayati Raj system in india.

After the Independence the constitutional assembly of India started framing the constitution for the free India. Mahatma Gandhi who played a key role in the national movement believed in broad based decentralised structure of power with numerous village panchayats at the bottom and a national panchayat at the apex level, elected by the intermediary levels of district and the

state panchayats with the ultimate control vesting in the hands of the village Panchayat³ But contrary to this view DR B.R.Ambedakar, the chairman of drafting committee, viewed it as "sink of localism" and a den of narrow mindedness"⁴. So the draft constitution discarded the village as administrative unit. but ultimately Gandhian scheme of thought was given place in the directive principles of state policy under article 40 of the constitution which was not backed by the judiciary. Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru Set up Balwant Rai Mehta committee to improve the status of panchayats. Later on Ashok Mehta Commettee, G.V.K Rao Commettee, L.M. Singhvi committee were formed to suggest the ways and means to strengthen these institutions.

The credit of constitutionalising these institutions goes to P.V.Narsimha Rao whose govt. in 1992 introduced an historic bill in the Parliament to revitalised these institutions in the shape of 73rd amendment bill and got it passed on April 1993 with the approval of 3/4 state legislative assemblies⁵. This bill made it mandatory for all the state govt. to amend their laws relating to panchayati raj in accordance with the 73rd Amendment. This amendment contained important provisions for the effective working of Panchayat Raj Institutions. It provides the establishment of a three tier system and periodic elections to these bodies by the state election commission, establishment of a finance commission in every state to review the financial relation between the state and panchayati raj institutions⁶. Thus the 73rd amendment strengthened the roots of panchayati raj institutions in the democratic system in India.

Panchayati Raj System in Punjab

Panchayats have their roots in Punjab before the arrival of britishers. After the annexation of Punjab in 1849, the Britishers

were reluctant to consider it desirable to encourage the working of village panchayat. They were interested in expansion of resources which they could use for their benefit. So they passed Punjab Panchayati Raj Act in 1912 for establishing local self bodies. But due to the apathy of govt. only 31 panchayat existed by the year 1916.⁷ To revive the system again Punjab Panchayat Act of 1921 was passed to establish the Panchayat in all the villages, but their number could not exceed 300 by 1925-26 and by the close of 1930-32 it increased to 1018⁸.

The independence had its own impact on the promotion of Panchayati Raj system in Punjab. Punjab was one of the few states in India which translate Art.40 of the Directive Principles of state policy into reality by passing Punjab Gram Sabha Act in 1952. This Act is a landmark in the history of panchayat movement as this Act sought to establish 'Panchayati Raj' on the Gandhian principles in each village of the state instead of in selected villages as provided in the Act of 1939⁹. Later on Punjab Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad Act 1961 was passed to establish the three tier system on the line of Balwant Rai Mehta committee report. Thus the Panchayati Raj system has taken its roots fairly and early but could not develop fast because the govt. tended to be indifferent with regard to holding the elections to these bodies.

The people of Punjab got the chance to elect the members to Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad only three time before the passing of Panjab Panchayati Raj Act 1994 in 1963, 1966 and 1976. The term of Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad of 1966 was to expire in 1969 but the Punjab govt. extended its term in the whole of state from three to five years. As a result of this decision the existing Zila parishads continued to operate till 1971. Congress govt. headed by Giani Zail Singh instead of conducting the election, demobilised these institutions on January 1973. For a period of 1973 to 1976 Deputy Commissioners of all the districts performed the functions of Zila Parishads. Congress govt. decided to conduct the elections to these bodies which were held on 24 Dec. 1976. But the Akali Govt. that followed, suspended the functioning of these institutions on 12 Oct. 1978 for an indefinite period¹⁰.

It is surprising that all the successive governments from 1976 to 1994 had been postponing elections of these bodies on account of uncertain political climate in the state due to militancy. The grass root level democracy remained paralysed for more than 18 years. During this period neither central nor state authorities made any effort to re-establish these institutions here. Congress leader Beant Singh sworn as chief minister of Punjab in 1992 after a long period of President rule. He tried to cash upon its freshly acquired image of 'eradicator of militancy' and did not delay the restoration of democracy at the local level. Beant Singh govt. passed the Punjab panchayati Raj Act in 1994 on the line of 73rd Amendment Act and an election commission was constituted to conduct the election of these bodies. The Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishads elections were held in Sep. 1994 after a long gap of 18 years. The congress political

party won sweeping majority in these elections. The tenure of these elected bodies were to be ended in 1999, but govt did not conducted the election to these bodies upto. 2003 After 2003 election to these bodies were conducted on the 12th May 2008 in which Akali political party got absolute majority¹¹. The tenure of these bodies were expired in 2013, so govt. conducted election to these bodies on May 19 2013.

Election of Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishads

Election of Panchayat samities were held on 19th May 2013 for the 333 seats of 22 Zila parishads and 2732 seats of 146 panchayat samities. But on 19th May election were held for 329 seats of 22 Zila parishads and 2729 seats of 146 panchayat samities. 5786 candidates contested for 2732 zones of block samities and 760 contested for 331 seats of 22 zila parishads¹². The state recorded 65% voter turnout. Highest polling was witnessed in Mansa i.e 72% and lowest in Gurdaspur i.e. 52.81%. State witnessed incidents of violence in the district of Patiala, Mansa and Pathankot. Some incidents of arson and group clashes were also witnessed in the district of Muktsar apart from incidents of booth capturing in the districts of Ferozepur, Faridkot, Fazlika and Gidderbaha. but overall election were peaceful as was indications claimed by chief minister of Punjab S. Parkash Singh Badal¹³.

Name of Political Party	Seats in Panchayat Samities	Seats in Zila Parishads
Shiromani Akali Dal-Bhartiya Janta Party	2122	299
Congress	454	26
Others	153	06
Total	2729	331
unopposed	229	30

Party wise position of important political parties in these election showed many significant indications. The SAD-BJP combine won 299 seats out of 329 seats of zila Parishads and 2122 out of 2739 seats of Panchayat samities. The land slide victory of shiromani Akali Dal and Bhartiya Janta Party consolidated its hold over the rural masses.

The congress political party suffered a massive defeat in these elections. The party bagged 454 seats in Panchayat samiti election and only 26 seats in Zila Parishads¹⁴. The party has been out of power for the last six years. Overall SAD-BJP did well in Amritsar, Bathinda, Barnaia, Ferozepur, Faridkot, Moga, Mukatsar and Tarantaran whereas Congress make its presence felt in Hoshiarpur and Jalandhar¹⁵. The party was unable to make its house in order and seven structure at the grass root level though made an broad alliance with Peoples party of Punjab and seat adjustment with Bahujan Samaj Party¹⁶. On the other hand the election indicates that BSP, CPI and CPM have long miles to cover to reach the hearts of rural masses of Punjab.

The victory of SAD in these elections depicts that Akalis had practiced micro management during the last seven years. Earlier they won Assembly election second time and now these election to rural local bodies second time. Actually there were always two groups at the village level and the Congress used to get the votes of one group but this time SAD was able to win the poor peasantry which earlier was the congress vote bank. Another reason for congress poor performance was the dwindling cadre of congress at the rural level. The party leaders did not have adequate number of workers to mobilise the voters at the village level. Moreover though Congress president S.Partap Singh Bajwa campaigned actively but other leaders were not serious and opted friendly opposition approach. They preferred to lie low and keep away from active politics¹⁷. So there is a need for the introspection and look into the loopholes to perform better for the next time.

Conclusion

The election of rural level local bodies declared that electoral bipolarity exists in Punjab like most of the other states. The electoral competition is mainly between Congress which is the main national political party and Akali Dal which is important regional party of Punjab. Since the reorganisation of Punjab in 1966, the electoral politics mainly revolves around these two political parties. However SAD contested this election having an alliance with BJP. And Congress party made an unofficial alliance with People Party of Punjab. SAD-BJP ruling combine drubbed the joint opposition,

In Punjab a shift has taken place in the agenda of SAD. In these election SAD has adopted a secular approach to win the public support in the dual community state Since its inception Akali Dal worked for Sikh and Panthic identity but over the time it has changed its religio-political colour to political-economic colour as in these election the political and economic issues have become more importance to its politics. During the demand for creation of Punjabi Suba in 50's, rise of militancy in 80's and the demand of creating an independent khalistan, religion has dominated the politics of Punjab but in this battle for ballot SAD did not adopt communal approach. The coalition between SAD and BJP helped the SAD to win the support of hindu community also. It helped in enhancing the hindu sikh harmony in the State. Both SAD and BJP emphasised in these election on development, peace and communal harmony in the state. The economic issue have gained importance causing the communal interest to take the secondary position. Last not the least whatever may be the strategy of SAD or Congress, history repeats itself in Punjab politics. History showed that election to

Panchayati Raj institutions was always won by the ruling party of the day.

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