



Resurgence of Democracy in Post Conflict Punjab: Causes and Consequences

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Abstract

The electoral and political developments in post-conflict Punjab provide a unique opportunity to analyze the reconstruction model for troubled democracies. The Punjab witnessed upsurge of militant groups and collapse of democratic processes. The latter was evident from the fact that state remained under President Rule for more than four and half years after dismissal of Barnala Government. The state also witnessed one of the lowest turnouts in the terms of voting percentage in 1992 State assembly elections which were boycotted by major Akali parties. However, suddenly democracy saw resurgence as militant groups are routed, elections are being peacefully conducted and different political players which once took belligerent attitude towards constitutional structures are participating in electoral processes. This signifies the ability of democratic institutions to revitalize them even after troubled past. This research work proves that pursuing moderate approach both by State and various groups provides opportunity to democratic institutions to function effectively. In turn, the democratic institutions provide ample opportunities for peaceful resolution of conflicts and interest fulfillment. This is win-win situation for state, society and individual players.

Keywords: Akali Dal, militancy, democracy, elections, punjab.

Introduction

The state of Punjab has witnessed much political upheavals in pre and post- independence periods but the last two decades of twentieth century saw many disturbances when the very existence of democratic institutions came under attack. In these two decades low-intensity warfare engulfed the state where such was the scale of violence that it consumed 21,469 lives which included members of security forces, militants and civilians¹. However, violence which resulted in such bloodbath abated in first half of nineties. Moreover, democratic institutions bounced back to vitality in short span of time and democratic process re-established completely. Political actors, who were once questioning the very existence of constitutional and democratic structures, are now participating in democratic process. The Akali Dal used to be vanguard of struggle against the alleged excessive use of power by Central governments. *Morchas* and *Dharam Yudhs* were its tools for struggle. However, same Akali Dal now swears on constitutional politics and is not only power incumbent party in state but also shares power as partner of National Democratic Alliance at centre. But one needs to analyze what brought this change in political atmosphere of state. The answer lies in the scrutiny of the functioning of democratic institutions in post-conflict phase. This study could help in understanding this metamorphosis of political scene in state and also answer the question that is democracy helpful in resolving conflict and establishing enduring peace? This question needs to be raised as still it is argued that material linking democracy to civil peace and conflict resolution is not a robust and more research is needed to establish which type of institutes make for enduring peace and stability in aftermath of a civil war².

The analysis of political history of India reveals, *inter alia*, Congress party has outlived its days of political hegemony in electoral scene both at the union and provincial level. This is an end of, as Rajni Kothari christens, "Congress system"³. This becomes clear from the fact that Congress party got decimated in 2014 Lok Sabha elections. The party could win just 44 seats. After the collapse of Congress system a multi-party system had developed and coalition politics replaced Congress system. At Union level both major national parties Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party found them in power with the help of other and particularly regional political parties. Even in the provinces, national parties faced daunting challenge from regional parties for their struggle for power. In the same way, electoral and political trajectory of north-eastern state of Punjab was not different from the rest of India. Since the reorganization of Punjab on linguistic basis both Akali Dal and Congress came to hold power alternatively. However, State assembly elections of February 2012 broke this trend and hurled new era where incumbent alliance was voted back to the power. And this incumbent alliance is headed by regional party like Akali Dal as major partner. Consequently, these elections resulted in hegemony of regional party being established over major national party *viz.* Congress. In the same way General elections to 16th Lok Sabha produced unique results where BJP won majority of its own. These new developments have far reaching implications for the working of Indian political system.

The Parties of/and Conflict: The focus of this research work is resurgence of democracy in post conflict phase in Punjab. Therefore, researcher would analyze the trajectory of political developments leading to re-establishment of democratic order

after militancy was routed. The Congress and Akalis remained major players in Punjab politics. However, contrary to the popular belief that Akalis were responsible for sabotaging democratic institutions, they were in fact major victims of weakening of democracy. And when democratic processes were restored, they emerged as major beneficiaries. The focus also remains to analyze the role of different political players in alienation and resurgence of democracy during this period. With hindsight, one knows that though the Congress dominated the political scene in state but Akalis also tried different techniques to gain and maintain power. If they had taken moderate approach then they had also tried hardliner approach to consolidate votes of Sikh community in their favor. It was clear that even in new Punjab⁴ where Sikh population constituted more than sixty percent⁵. The Akali Dal with its moderate approach was not getting more than fifty percent votes of Sikhs. However, it was also true that due to its moderate approach Akali Dal was able to form United Front Ministries with the help of non-Congress parties. But Akalis would have never thought that they would need the help of other parties in Sikh majority state to form Government. Therefore, this limitation compelled them to do something different in order to form government independently. But contrary to the plans of Akalis to monopolize power in post reorganization phase of Punjab, the Congress party was able to win in 1972 and 1980 state assembly elections. This led to bewilderment within Akali ranks. They realized that they have lost their ethnic vote bank to Congress which they must get back. Consequently, Akalis drifted to Sikh based orientations in order to consolidate Sikh votes in their favor. They erred in their judgment that consolidation of Sikh votes in their favor would get them power. Rather, this action on their part to raise Sikh based orientations had spillover effects, which created space for Sikh militancy. The Sikh militant leaders utilized resultant resentment among members of Sikh community effectively to swell their ranks. When the leadership of the militant faction came in the hands of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, he was able to attract followers to join him in droves. There were multiple reasons for his gaining huge support by Sikh youth. Some were attracted to his image of infallible religious leader. Besides religious reasons, there were also economic and social reasons of his gaining strength as his other followers also included Jats of peasant background who were unable to reap the benefits of Green Revolution and members of lower Sikh castes of artisans and laborers who saw their own social advancement in the process initiated by Bhindranwale⁶. It was clear that Sikh militancy under the leadership of Bhindranwale hijacked movement which was initiated by Akalis. The Akali Dal as a political party and democratic institution was pushed to political wilderness due to its radical approach.

Furthermore, the Congress party which was leading Union government had vested interests to sideline Akalis from politics of Punjab. This was tantamount of not letting the democratic and constitutional mechanism to have its natural functioning in order to place Akalis on disadvantageous position. This played

havoc with political system as a whole. Mrs. Indra Gandhi's attempts to centralize power and create advantage Congress situation compelled her to manipulate processes against rival political parties. She had particular dislike for Akalis as they actively participated against internal Emergency imposed by her in June 1975. Therefore, with ulterior motive to outmaneuver Akalis from competitive electoral politics, Congress party went even to the extent of patronizing the extremists and not giving any political concession to moderate Akalis with accepting their demands⁷. This all resulted in democracy going awry and Akalis being pushed away from electoral politics. Akalis had in particular bad experience of this period. Moreover, conflict in Punjab created such vortex of violence which engulfed all political actors, compelling them to sincerely make efforts to resolve it.

Resurgence of Democracy: Meanwhile, elections for the State assembly were announced to be held in June 1991. But Election Commission of India postponed elections at the last moment. This move of Election Commission was criticized by Akalis blaming that this act was to favor Congress party. Therefore, Akalis decided to boycott elections to state assembly when conducted next time. All major Akali Dals boycotted these elections. In fact, elections were marked by 48-hour 'Bandh Call' given by Akali Dals⁸. After the assembly elections of 1992 Congress formed Government in Punjab but it was with meager vote share of 10.43 per cent. Total 23.82 per cent votes were polled during the elections⁹. It was clear from the results that the parties which boycotted elections have actually won¹⁰. Now, Prakash Singh Badal seems to have realized that the people of Punjab do not want Congress in power and are ready to give power to other parties. But this required participation in politics through constitutional means. This was the time Akalis with moderate thinking started drifting away from hardliner agenda. Their goal was now clear; to get power by employing constitutional means. Peoples' longing for peace and development and presence of constitutional means offered them incentives required to shun radical approach. Resultantly, moderate Akalis decided to bid farewell to politics of confrontation and revert to politics through constitutional means as and when opportunity arises. Akali faction led by Prakash Singh Badal seems to have also realized the tradition of Akalis and parted ways from hardliners. Moreover, this different tradition helped them to restart new journey and also stand to the ideological onslaughts of political opponents that they are separatists. Though our analysis established that Akalis stressed on Sikh based orientations in order to consolidate Sikh votes in their favor but one has to accept that there remained vast ideological differences between Akalis and Sikh militants. Not only remained a difference but Virginia Van Dyke categorizes Akalis' relations with Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale as "uneasy"¹¹. Moreover, Akalis and militant faction had support of different sections of society. The militant's support was limited to faction of Sikh community with fundamentalist approach and/or victims of inability of state to protect their rights. But it must be made clear that there was no time when

whole Sikh community had undercurrent sub-nationalist feelings. The proof of this fact is that Sikh community was itself worst affected by militant movement as sixty percent those killed by militants were Sikhs¹².

Although it is difficult to give a single factor which prompted Akalis to shun Panthaic agenda but surely absence of sub-nationalist feelings among Sikh community was one of the reasons. And once it had been decided to participate in constitutional politics then Akalis were again finding best techniques to capture power. They seem to have understood from the political history of the state that moderate political parties have more chances of success in multi-ethnic societies. Meanwhile, another development took place in Punjab politics which established clear demarcation between Akalis who had faith in constitutional set-up and Akalis who were aspiring for new political dispensation but without employing violent means. On the initiatives of Jathedar Akal Takht Manjit Singh, Akali Dal (Amritsar) was formed on 1 May 1994. This new political party adopted its policy program in the form of Amritsar Declaration which was manifestation of its hardliner agenda¹³. As mentioned earlier Prakash Singh Badal had made his mind to bid farewell to hardliner politics. Therefore, it was right time for him to establish his own position so he politely but firmly refused to join the Akali unity. Consequently, the demarcation on ideological basis was established even in the Akali politics. The Akali Dal under the leadership of Prakash Singh Badal started laying emphasis on moderate approach. This is clear from the fact that Akali Dal decided to open its doors for non-Sikh persons on its seventy-fifth anniversary celebrations at Moga held on 24-25 February 1996. It ideological turnaround was evident from the fact that unlike Anandpur Sahib Resolution where the party took pro community approach, now it vowed for establishment of 'rule of the humble' (*Halemi Raj*), an expression used by fifth Sikh Guru Arjun Dev for a dispensation where no person or community would predominate the other. The Akali Dal now asserted to maintain peace and communal harmony in the state at any cost and affirmed its faith in democratic and constitutional methods¹⁴. This new ideological posture of Akali Dal benefited it in electoral competitions. It started getting support of different sections of society. This was evident from the results of different elections conducted during this period. Prominent among these were bye-elections of Ajnala (31 May 1994) and Gidharbha (3 June 1995) assembly seats, SGPC General House elections held in October 1996 (ecclesiastical domain of Sikh politics), Punjab assembly elections of February 1997 and Parliamentary elections of 1996 and 1998. It was suggested that Akali Dal (Badal's) shift from religio-political to politico-economics is the main reason for its success in elections.¹⁴ It was the need to gain the fruits of power within the constitutional structure that obliged moderate Akalis to shun away hardliner rhetoric. Therefore, moderate Akalis started getting electoral benefits by adopting moderate approach. The results of various elections held in Punjab in post-conflict phase and particularly of assembly elections 2012 and Lok Sabha elections 2014 also reconfirmed this fact as

moderate Akalis repeatedly getting support by voters whereas hardliner Akalis are getting electorally routed.

The tilt of moderate as well as radical Akalis toward participation in democratic and constitutional process shows that the democracy in its various forms has been not only mechanism of government in peace time but also offers numerous avenues for peaceful resolution of conflicts and in this way acts as harbinger of peace in post-conflict societies. However, the force has its own relevance in a democracy as it crushes the elements which have completely lost faith in democracy and employ violent means to resist the authority of state. Therefore, the role of security forces which fought with militant factions in Punjab cannot be ignored. Total 1781 members of security forces lost their lives from 1981 to 1996 while eradicating militancy during this phase in Punjab¹⁵. However; one must remember that force alone cannot solve coercive movements. Julio Reberio, former Director General of Police, Punjab reflected same opinion when he asserted that Police can fight terrorism, not solve it¹⁶. There are studies which explored the role of force eradicating violent political movements. In such study, how mature and fragile democratic states in different parts of the world tackled groups employing political violence Robert and Richardson is of the view that there is no one simple policy prescription or silver bullet for successfully countering terrorism. It is only government's efforts to address the underlying factor that gave rise to terrorism coupled with the use of effective coercive policies which have more chances to succeed¹⁷. In another such study, it has been argued that in well institutionalized and weakly institutionalized democracies, different leadership strategies against ethnic based movements can result in different outcomes. In well institutionalized democracy like India, accommodation leads to inverse "U" curve of ethnic politics whereas unaccommodating leadership strategy such as against Sikh in Punjab leads to demands and repression cycle. In such circumstances conflict is resolved when besides using force an accommodating leader comes to power within the established state¹⁸. In Punjab peace could be restored only after militant factions were routed with force and accommodational approach was adopted by state and central leadership towards each other. Ample opportunities were provided to all political players to participate in political processes and those who still resisted were taken to task with force. These ample opportunities were provided in the form of elections. The elections have ability to reassure people that their interests and opinions count and provide honorable exit from mutually exhausting confrontation. The elections also provide avenues for the exercise of power through means other than war¹⁹. In this way, democratic institutes provide exit routes both to coercive movements and governments so that peace can be restored. Akalis who were hostile to the alleged discriminatory and democratic processes in past once got opportunity to share power through same process became contented. Akalis advocated, now, for constitutional and democratic methods. In light of above stated facts one can assert various elections and their results served this purpose and also

convinced political elites of changing mood of people and their chances of getting power through ballot which could not be achieved by militants through bullet.

The Road Ahead for Democratic Institution: The Akali Dal was in power from 1997 to 2002 and from 2007 to 2012 and is presently power incumbent party in the state and is also part of ruling BJP led National Democratic Alliance at centre. So far Akalis have proved their commitment true. They are keeping away from supporting, to a large extent, radical agenda and cultivating their image as Punjabi party. Another fact that people were with moderate politics is evident as hardliner Akali Dal under the leadership of Simranjit Singh Mann drew negligible vote share in comparison to Akali Dal (B) in various elections held in Punjab. Simranjit Singh Mann was the same person who won Tarn Taran Parliamentary seat securing record 89.16 per cent vote share and his party had won eight out of thirteen Lok Sabha seats in 1989 Parliamentary elections²⁰. The society was polarized on the religious basis at that time. But circumstances changed drastically thereafter as people's dislike for political parties racking up issues which have potential to derail hard earned peace and economic development is clear. The situation is such where parties which people think are divisive are sidelined and those promoting peace are rewarded. The vote share of Akali Dal (A) is decreasing in every election. Simranjit Singh Mann lost his security deposit from Khandoor Sahib Lok Sabha constituency in 2014 Lok Sabha elections and Akali Dal (Amritsar) got only 0.3 percent vote share. One wonders this trend is not only evident in secular domain but also in ecclesiastical domain of Punjab politics. The Akali Dal under the leadership of Simranjit Singh Maan was also not able to get support of Sikh voters by raising emotive community based issues in SGPC General House elections. This reconfirms the fact that democracy had great potential in limiting extremism. Democratic accommodation actually sheds the hard light of reality on the fringe appeal of extremism and renders extreme right parties weak. These parties might initially show populism-driven electoral success but could not maintain the momentum and rendered irrelevant when they receive miniscule proportion of the vote²¹. Therefore, parties which wish to survive politically in democratic set-up would have to be more accommodative and inclusive to the interests of all sections of society.

Although there is no denying of the fact that an identity based party like Akali Dal faces electoral handicap in multi-ethnic society. It is because its electoral support base remains largely confined to single group. However, in democratic set-up this handicap can be overcome with the help of alliance politics. Rather, when analyzing functioning of democratic institutions in multi-ethnic society, the coalition factor would definitely creep in. These coalitions are inescapable realities of plural societies as different interests are represented by different political parties/groups. In the case of Punjab, Akalis' alliance with Bahujan Samaj Party and BJP, Congress's alliance with Communist Party of India and BSP and Peoples Party of Punjab's alliance with CPI at different points of time is evidence of every party's inability to get people's mandate of its own. The Congress had previously been able to get support of different sections of society due to goodwill it earned during struggle for freedom. However, its waning strength led the rise of coalitions. In Punjab, Akali-BJP coalition is one of these coalitions which have been able to dislodge Congress party out of power many times. The Akali Dal has found its way to power through alliance politics in past and seems to have made resolve to tread on the same path.

As far as the alliance of Akalis with BJP is concerned, one can assert that if one analyses the ideologies of both these parties then one reaches on conclusion that these parties are poles apart. Akalis are champions of states' rights and hold pro-Sikh community orientations. On the other hand, BJP is sworn to its radical nationalist and pro-Hindu agenda. However, Akali-BJP alliance has benefited them hugely *vis-à-vis* their competition with Congress party. This comes evident from the fact that in Punjab assembly elections held in February 2012, Akali Dal (B) got 34.73 percent vote share whereas Congress got 40.09 percent votes. In terms of vote share, Akali Dal and BJP declined in comparison to their own performance in last assembly elections held in February 2007. Whereas the vote share of Congress remained constant. However, it was BJP; pre-poll alliance partner of Akali Dal (B) which with its vote share of 7.18 per cent helped its alliance partner to surpass Congress (see the table 2). Same was true in 2014 Lok Sabha elections. The Akalis were able to outmaneuver Congress in the terms of seats despite getting lesser vote share (see the table 1).

Table-1
Lok Sabha Elections 2009 and 2014 in Punjab

Party	Lok Sabha Elections 2009			Lok Sabha Elections 2014		
	Seats contested	Seats won	% of votes	Seats contested	Seats won	% of votes
INC	13	8	45.2	13	3	33.2
SAD (B)	10	4	33.9	10	4	26.4
BJP	3	1	10.1	3	2	8.8
BSP	13	0	5.7	13	0	1.9
LBP	3	0	1.0	----	----	----
AAP	----	----	----	13	4	24.5
SAD (A)	3	0	0.4	9	0	0.3

Source: Indivotes, India's Largest Election Data Base. Retrieved from www.indivotes.com

Table-2
Punjab Assembly Elections 2007 and 2012

Party	2007		2012	
	Won	Per-centage	Won	Per-centage
INC	44	40.9	46	40.9
SAD	49	37.9	56	34.73
BJP	19	8.28	12	7.18
CPI	0	0.76	0	0.82
CPM	0	0.28	0	0.16
PPOP	-	-	0	5.04
BSP	0	4.13	0	4.29
IND	5	6.82	3	6.75
SAD (A)	0	0.52	0	0.28

Source: Source: Indivotes, India's Largest Election Data Base. Retrieved from www.indivotes.com

It is undisputed fact now that Akali Dal (B) and BJP are ideologically unnatural allies but electoral compulsions of democracy of the state make their alliance likely thing to happen. Another positive aspect of their alliance is that it has diluted their radical ideologies till both these parties are in alliance with each other²². As mentioned, in the terms of vote share Congress remained single largest party in various elections but it could not convert its vote share into seats in absence of alliance partner. However, Congress can gain in another way and that is if Akali-BJP alliance breaks and their votes are turns to its kitty. This puts Akalis on disadvantageous position. But this could happen only when Akali shun moderate politics or they are forced to take radical stance. This happened in past, resulting in Akalis being dislodged from power, society being polarized on communal lines and functioning of democratic institutions getting seriously flawed. However, restoration of Akali-BJP alliance has ruled out such possibility in future and helped both parties in their electoral competition with political opponents. Their alliance also secularized the political agenda of both right wing parties as far as politics in Punjab is concerned. Both parties are now stressing on issues such as development and social harmony. Therefore, one can argue that alliance politics in plural societies also help in revitalizing democratic institutions.

Our analysis also proved that the role of individual political players not only determine the trajectory of politics but also of social and economic developments in society. Here lies the need to understand the political behavior of Sikh politicians. External political actors' action and reaction with them had created crisis in Punjab. Whereas the solution of Punjab crisis needed a normative shift in approach of Indian Government, it also required change on the part of Sikh politicians. In order to survive politically, they would have to either achieve higher degree of unity or develop a tolerance of differences and channel their energies into a competitive democratic system²³. Akalis' attitude in post-conflict era seems to validate the assertion that flexible approach on their part would help restoring peace in Punjab which in turn would help them to compete for power. It proved true and they captured power for

three times in last four assembly elections and in one they lost with wafer-thin margin and are partner of ruling alliance at centre. But this all happened in changed circumstances when Akalis had opportunity to compete in level playing field. It seems that Akalis have found their strategy in form of moderate and accommodating politics in post-conflict society in Punjab. These may be the compulsions of electoral politics but Akali leaders' shunning away Panthic agenda and attempt to be a Punjabi party by putting emphasis over Punjab, Punjabi and Punjabi is welcome development. Akalis' success in post conflict phase does not mean that there is no scope for other parties in democratic set-up. The Congress party was able to form Government after 2002 assembly elections. In 2014 Lok Sabha elections Aam Aadmi Party won 4 seats with 24.5 percent vote share. Therefore, resurgence of democracy have not only benefited all democratic organizations including political parties but also benefitted people by providing them avenues to articulate their aspirations and vent their resentment in democratic way.

Conclusion

The analysis of politics in Punjab in post-conflict phase proves that democratic institutions provide more chances to accommodate various interests of society. But political history of world also shows that democratic governments have their fair share of coercive movements. Therefore, question is why such coercive movements rise in democracies? Our analysis with regard to Punjab crisis has shown that it is lack of accommodation, employing dictatorial tactics and playing of divisive politics for promoting vested interests by concerned parties and politicians which led to crisis. In such situation, it is difficult to reconcile different interests present in society and vicious circle of violence ensues. The answer of breaking this circle lies in giving representation to different societal interests in power sharing mechanism. This ability of democracy to bring synthesis in heterogeneous interests in society and bring normalization in the society makes it most popular governance system in world. The total number of electoral democracies in world was 60 percent in 2012²⁴ meaning that more people are

living under the system where they can choose their rulers and thereby their destiny.

Arguably, democracy not only holds many avenues for the peaceful resolution of conflict in the society but also provides opportunity to political actors to have their share in power. It is clear that developing democratic institutions also bring maturity in political system, making it more transparent, equality based and efficient. But does mere existence of representative institutions and conduct of elections qualifies democracy to be labeled as great system of governance? Or there is need of fine balance of governance and accountability with ability to ameliorate if there is conflict in the society. It is aim of this researcher to argue that it is trait of democratic government to possess ability to accommodate different interests. And if there is conflict then to diffuse it without or with minimum use of force. On the other hand, it is trait of dictatorial regimes to crush coercive political movements without providing accommodation of any type. But when such coercive movements get strong, they pose credible threat to the existence of dictatorial regimes itself. There are innumerable examples of movements against dictatorial regimes where rulers were thrown out of power through violence and their security establishment could not save these regimes. The democratic regimes have more chances of survival against such movements as they are more likely to diffuse these movements through accommodation.

The existence of democratic institutions provides opportunity to all political actors to rejoin mainstream politics. The provisions of political rights and civil liberties available to political actors help them to prove their political worth and be again the integral part of the political system. In a democracy no one is political pariah until and unless one tries to strike at the very roots of constitutional and democratic institutes. All political actors need to work for socioeconomic development which is essence of democracy²⁵. The Punjab has seen much bloodshed in last two decades of twentieth century. But to the astonishment of all, political normalcy was restored and socio-economic development again is on course. Regular conduct of peaceful elections and transfer of power in Punjab has even convinced intelligentsia that politics based on identity, alienation and terrorism took backseat in the state politics and issues of development and social harmony and interest fulfillment took centre stage²⁶. All political players seemed to have learnt the lesson that the fate of democracies and political parties is tied and their wellbeing is necessary for socioeconomic development of the society. If this analysis is helpful for political parties, it also serves as an example to the draconian regimes trying to crush anti-establishment movements without giving them democratic way-out. One must realize that democracy survives on the value that shared power is safe power.

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