

Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and 2017 Assembly Elections in Punjab: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Despite the unpredicted electoral mandate AAP got in 2014, the party won just one seat in 2019 General Elections in Punjab. While emerging as a third alternative in 2017 assembly elections, AAP failed in gaining ground against Modi wave in General Elections. This article will focus on the key factors responsible for the failure of AAP in Punjab. Fissure within the party, incapability of AAP in creating the balance between Punjab and Delhi leadership resulted in the poor performance not only in Punjab but across India. The party drew a blank in by- polls in the four constituencies: Phagwara, Dakha, Mukerian and Jalalabad. This performance of AAP has revealed the poor connection of the party leaders with the people. The paper will emphasize on the electoral performance of the party since its unexpected emergence in Punjab and will throw a dim light on its future prospects in Punjab. It is a matter of great concern whether the AAP will disappear into Modi fog or solidify its existence in Punjab in forthcoming elections.

Key Words: Fissure, Solidify, Squabble, Unpredicted

Introduction

Desperation among the people of India against corruption and the movement of 2011 led by Anna Hazare made inroads into the formation of AAP in 2012. Party formation was not an agenda to be focused as Hazare wanted to remain far away from politics (www.indiatoday.in). AAP comes into existence under the leadership of Arvind Kejriwal. It entered the political scene with strong foothold in 2014 General elections in Punjab. This was the first time in the history that a brand new party with a non-Punjab face got remarkable success in the political arena of Punjab where Shiromani Akali Dal and Congress are main contesting powers for a long span of time. Emerging as a third alternative in the 2017, the

party got only 20 seats and occupied the Chair of the Opposition in Punjab assembly. But it was alarming to see the vote share it got comparing to what the hype suggested. Introspecting the mistakes which it did in the previous election, the party could not succeed in making up the lost ground in General election 2019.

Crevasse among AAP Leaders

After making the unexpected success in 2014, squabble began cropping up in the party. A critical moment bubbled up in the AAP, when the chief founder of AAP in Punjab- Sucha Singh Chhotepur was accused for the corruption charges (Rai, P. 2017). Unable to put the house in order, Kejriwal dismissed him from the post of Chief in Punjab unit. A key player of AAP in Punjab, Dharamvir Gandhi from Patiala turned away from AAP and formed his own new party under the name of Nawan Punjab Party. The party had to suffer because of the delay in declaring the CM face. All these significant events happened when the 2017 assembly elections were on the corner and AAP could not save its sinking ship in Punjab. Winning just one seat in 2019 General Elections the party was drown in Modi wave (www.economictimes.com). Lack of door to door campaigning affected the AAP badly (www.indianexpress.com). Imbalance between the Delhi and Punjab leadership dispersed the party into multi dimensions, every leader playing his own flute.

The key point behind the defeat in 2017 and the subsequent failure in making the government in Punjab was not because of the lack of face for the CM candidate. But on the contrary, Punjab had many clean faces at that time to lead Punjab. The likes of Sukhpal singh Khaira, Bhagwant singh Mann, Simranjeet Singh Bains, to name a few, were popular and able, if Kejriwal would have wanted to test them. Perhaps AAP would have definitely repeated the outcome of 2014 by declaring the CM face as it improves the chances of a party to connect with the voters. Actually, it seems, Kejriwal was in no mood to make any advance in the direction to strengthen his leaders to be directly representing the people of Punjab. The dictatorial attitude of Kejriwal work as an impediment (Ronki, R. 2017).

Unceremonial dismissing of Khaira from the position of the opposition leader on 26 July 2018 in assembly put the party in turmoil (www.dailypioneer.com). Sukhpal Singh khaira and Bhagwant Mann's separation led to the confrontation between both the leaders affecting the performance of the party. Khaira resigned from the post when Bhagwant Mann was posted as a Chief of Punjab region. The apology of party president Arvind Kejriwal from Akali leader Bikram Singh Majhithia on the drug abuse issue moved the party towards the

disintegration. It was one of the blunders in political arena that was condemned by all the leaders of Punjab. Decision was taken without the consent of party members (www.hindustantimes.com). Lok Insaaf Party which was in alliance with AAP left the alliance in March 2018, sensing the foolishness of Kejriwal. Sukhpal Singh Khaira resigned from the State Legislature on 6 January 2019. After resigning, he founded a new political party- Punjab Ekta Party on January 8, 2019. On May 5, 2019, an assembly member from Rupnagar, Amarjit Singh Sandia too, resigned from the party. Further set back arrived crawling in the party when its leaders Baldev Singh from Jaiton and Nazar Singh Manshahia from Mansa resigned the party on 25th April and January 15, 2019 respectively. Manshahia's sudden joining of the Congress was further blow to AAP. H.S. Phoolka (Dakha) had already left the membership of assembly on October 12, 2018.

The Beginning of a Gargantuan Political Cataclysm

Sectarianism plays an important role in the politics of state. The victory of Congress party over eight seats in elections was not because of its good governance but it was due to the lack of Punjabi face as a party president of AAP. Instead of understanding the ground reality of Punjab, Kejriwal went on implementing the Delhi model of leadership. Having a raw structure of party organisation, the national party president could not handle the issues of priority. (Instead of working for victory in future, it may be left with 16 MLAs in assembly). The shifting of AAP leaders into other parties made sure that AAP is not different from any other political party. Political leaders come into the field to make their own gains. Public issues are thrown out in the background. The people of Punjab now started to think that how a friction ridden party could be expected to fight for Punjab issue. That's why party fails to regain its Dakha seat in by poll elections, where H.S. Phoolka bagged the seat in assembly elections, back in 2017. In an interview in concern with the Aam Aadmi Party, the common man replied that "we think something will change after the entry of AAP but all are same". Day to day news of bickering in the home turf of AAP put water on the expectations of general masses. Throwing behind the Punjab issue party engaged in internal conflicts.

AAP emerged in the state when people were unhappy with SAD - BJP alliance and Congress rule. The desecration of Guru Granth Sahib and Bargari issue fuelled the people against SAD which are often considered as the protector of Sikh interests. On the other hand, people were suffering a corrupt rule of UPA II at the Central level. Having an alternative to both parties, the people of Punjab awarded AAP with 4 seats. It is a notable point that the

issue of development was not behind the success of AAP. The NRIs and diaspora community which were discontented with the suppression during the operation Blue star by the then government, gave an edge to AAP. The people of Punjab hoped that a change will come as an alternative to the depressing regimes of Akali-Congress in Punjab. Despite the substantial support of the people of Punjab, internal strife fell the party to the ground. What AAP learned from its mistakes is that labels do not pay back every time and at every place.

Punjab Legislative Assembly –AAP							
Election year	Overall votes	% of overall votes	Seat contested	Seat won	+/- in seats	+/- in vote share	Sitting side
2017	3,662,665	23.7	112	20/117	-	-	Left (main opposition party)

Source: Punjab State Election Commission

Lok Sabha Elections –AAP					
Election year	Overall votes	% of overall votes	Seat contested	Seat won	+/- in seats
2014 (debut)	1,13,25,635	2.05%	432	4	-
2019			36	1	Δ3

Source: Punjab State Election Commission

After the India Against Corruption (IAC) movement, became a brand name in every household and Anna Hazare fanned the emotive aspect of the people of India to stand against

the evils prevalent in the Indian political system, it was in the air that AAP- the political child of the movement which made an interesting entry in the political arena, that Indian politics is going to change for good. It's founder Arvind Kejriwal portrayed himself as a commoner with his simple wearings and choosing broom as a party symbol. The 'Aam Aadmi' certainly felt a connection with AAP and looked forward to support the party at any cost. But the label of 'Aam' seems to be shredded in the wake of political storms it faced in the testing waters. Something which is of substantial nature can put the party back on the track.

Repudiation and the Future Fair-Shake

Serving as the sole protector of Sikh interest, SAD played a dominant role in the politics of Punjab. After the failure as a panthic party, SAD formed the alliance with BJP to counter the influence of Congress in Punjab (Kumar, A. 2017). SAD and Congress remained the centre of politics. Dissatisfied with the alliance rule of second term (2007-2017) people were in search of third alternative and that was found in the emergence of Aam Admi Party in 2012. Drug mafia, sand mining, farmer suicides, indebtedness, justice for desecration of Guru Granth Sahib and the maintenance of law & order were the shouting issues which have not gone down well with SAD in 2017 assembly elections. Meanwhile, the electoral issues used by Congress such as the maintenance of law & order, government job to a member of each household, free smartphone, elimination of drug menace and others succeeded in holding the power. Lack of dominant local face of the AAP in Punjab and due to many other factors party bagged only 20 seats. It will be interesting to see which party takes the power in the upcoming assembly elections of Punjab where Drug menace, sand mining, law & order, sacrilege and firing issues are still prevalent in Congress government. Aam Adami Party needs more effective planing to gain the ground in upcoming elections. Remembering the expectations of Punjab, co-ordination between the Delhi-centric direction and Punjab leadership is needed to make good the loss.

Conclusion

AAP is no different than other political parties when it comes to introduce populist schemes to lure the voters. Eyeing the 2020 Assembly Elections, the AAP government has proposed to provide free rides to women in the Delhi Metro and in DTC buses, and nodded its Yes to regularise the unauthorised colonies of Delhi. But the blow it will have to bear in 2020 is the gradual decline in the popularity of Arvind Kejriwal. Kejriwal, as a leader is no more a player with whom the masses can sympathise and it would be a herculean task for

AAP to survive the mighty BJP. As Kumar (2019) puts, "The Arvind Kejriwal government may be able to hold on or tilt the support of women voters by such schemes, but that may not be enough for the party to win another election." Viewing from a completely different angle, one thing which is quite clear is that the drubbing in General Elections 2019 cannot be taken as the litmus test which will repeat itself in the Delhi Assembly Elections 2020 too. General Elections 2019 was a battle of the personalities- Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi, where Kejriwal was dwarfed by their respective national statures. It is simple to infer that AAP was wrong to field even 40 contestants from different parliamentary constituencies across India. In the future Kejriwal seems to be resorting to his first love- Delhi. Once the empire of Delhi is restored, AAP can risk to spread its roots to the neighbouring states. But as far as the central politics is concerned AAP has a long distance to cover.

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