

# 1996 Lok Sabha Elections: Reviving of Shiromani Akali Dal in Punjab

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## Abstract

During the period of militancy in the state (1980-92), the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) was politically marginalized by the Sikh radical groups operating in Punjab. However, the 1996 Lok Sabha election witnessed the revival of the dominance of the SAD in state politics. Earlier in 1977 the SAD was able to emerge as a formidable political force due to its impressive performance in the 1977 Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections in Punjab on account of the powerful anti-Congress and pro-Janata Party wave in their favour on the eve of this election and because of this party's pre-election alliance with the Janata party and the CPI (M) within the party system of Punjab. However, the party lost this position in the 1980 Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections because of dissatisfaction with the performance of the then SAD led Parkash Singh Badal coalition government on the one hand and the feeling of insecurity created among the Hindus as a result of the Akali-Nirankari clash on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1978 on the other. The SAD (Longowal) did succeed to get dominant status in 1985 election to Punjab Vidhan Sabha on account of the consolidation of the Sikh votes in the party's favour as a reaction against "Operation Blue-Star" and the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi and other parts of India in 1984. The sympathy created by assassination of Sant Harchand Singh Longowal on 20<sup>th</sup> August, 1985 had also helped the party in this context. However, the SAD (L) lost its dominance status as a result of split in the party after the Police entered in the Golden Temple in April 1986 to flush out militants. The SAD (Mann) another splinter of the Akali Dal succeeded in 1989 Lok Sabha election because of the support lent to it by the militants on the one hand and its alliance with the BSP on the other. The subsequent elections to Lok Sabha and Punjab Vidhan Sabha in 1992 were boycotted by all the major Akali Dal factions and almost all the Sikh voters. In the 1996 Lok Sabha election the SAD re-emerged as a single largest party in Punjab by winning 8 out of 13 Lok Sabha seats in the state.

**Key Words: SAD, BSP, BJP, INC, CPI, CPI (M), Majha, Malwa, Doaba .**

After a long spell of about five years of President's rule (the President rule was imposed on 11 May 1987)<sup>1</sup> the state of Punjab went to the polls in February, 1992. At the time of this election, the atmosphere of Punjab was totally surcharged with the threat of militancy. In this election, the voter's turnout was just approximately 23.82 percent.<sup>2</sup> Major factions of the Akali Dal boycotted this poll.<sup>3</sup> The Congress party came into power in these elections by winning 12 out of total 13 Lok Sabha and 87 out of 117 Vidhan Sabha seats. After formation of Congress government under the leadership of Sardar Beant Singh, militancy came to an end in the state. The term of 10<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha which was constituted in June 1991 was due to expire on the 8<sup>th</sup> July 1996. The 11<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections in Punjab to elect its 13 members were held on 27<sup>th</sup> April, 1996 along with the rest of the country. The result in respect of all the Lok Sabha constituencies of the state was declared on 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> May 1996.

The total number of voters in the state in this election was 1, 44, 89, 825.<sup>4</sup> In this election 9019302 voters out of the total of 1, 44, and 89, 825 voters exercised their franchise. Thus, the polling percentage was 62.24 in this election which was approximately 39 percent higher than the earlier election of 1992.<sup>5</sup>

A total 472 candidates had field their nominations for 13 Lok Sabha constituencies in Punjab. The constituency-wise break up of the candidates was : Gurdaspur 24, Amritsar 40, Tarn Taran 28, Jalandhar 32, Phillaur 14, Hoshiarpur 33, Ropar 23, Patiala 47, Ludhiana 64, Sangrur 46, Bathinda 34, Faridkot 45 and

Ferozpur 42.<sup>6</sup> Out of these, nominations of 31 candidates were rejected and 182 candidates withdrew their nomination. As a consequence of this, 259 candidates were left in the fray.

Seven national political parties - the Congress, the BJP, the CPI, the CPI(M), the Janata Dal, the Janata party and the All India Indira Congress (Tiwari) and two state parties-the SAD, and the BSP and eleven registered (unrecognized) parties participated in this election. Except SAD-BSP alliance no other political party formed alliance or arrived any seats adjustment. The main contest remained confined to the SAD-BSP alliance and the Congress.

The SAD-BSP alliance swept this poll by capturing 11 out of 13 Lok Sabha seats located in the state of Punjab. The electoral performance of political parties in terms of seats won and votes polled in 1996 Lok Sabha election has been shown in table no. 1.

**Table: 1**

**Performance of Political Parties in 1996 Lok Sabha Elections in Punjab in Terms of Seats and Votes**

| Party          | 1992            |           |            | 1996            |           |            | Gain/Loss Seats | Swing % |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------|------------|-----------------|-----------|------------|-----------------|---------|
|                | Seats Contested | Seats Won | % of Votes | Seats Contested | Seats Won | % of Votes |                 |         |
| SAD*           | -               | -         | -          | 9               | 8         | 28.72      | +8              | +28.72  |
| BSP            | 12              | 1         | 19.71      | 4               | 3         | 9.35       | +2              | -10.36  |
| INC            | 13              | 12        | 49.27      | 13              | 2         | 35.10      | -10             | -14.17  |
| BJP            | 9               | 0         | 16.51      | 6               | 0         | 6.48       | 0               | -10.03  |
| Janata Dal     | 5               | 0         | 2.23       | 1               | 0         | 2.66       | 0               | +0.43   |
| CPI            | 1               | 0         | 1.57       | 3               | 0         | 1.60       | 0               | +0.03   |
| CPI(M)         | 3               | 0         | 3.98       | 3               | 0         | 2.68       | 0               | -1.30   |
| SAD(Mann)*     | -               | -         | -          | 7               | 0         | 3.85       | 0               | +3.85   |
| IND and Others | 35              | 0         | 4.95       | 213             | 0         | 9.56       | 0               | +4.61   |

\* The major factions of the SAD had boycotted the 1992 elections of Punjab.

**Source :- Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, Punjab, Chandigarh, 1992 and 1996 Lok Sabha Elections of Punjab.**

The table no. 1 reveals that in terms of seats the SAD alone got 8 out of 9 Lok Sabha seats contested by it in this election. The BSP, its alliance partner won 3 out of 4 that it had contested in this election. It had won only 1 Lok Sabha seat in 1992 Lok Sabha election. The Congress party was routed despite of its claim that it had brought peace to Punjab. Infact, there was a deep-rooted resentment against it among the general public for its poor performance which found expression in voting. The Congress which got 12 out of 13 Lok Sabha seats in 1992 Lok Sabha election could win only 2 out of 13 Lok Sabha seats contested by it in 1996 Lok Sabha election. The other political parties like the BJP, the Janata Dal, the CPI, the CPI (M) and the SAD (M) could not open their account in this election in terms of seats won.

In terms of percentage of votes polled the SAD-BSP alliance secured 38.07% votes in 1996 Lok Sabha election. The SAD secured 28.72% votes in this election. The BSP secured 9.35% votes in this election though it had obtained 19.71% votes in 1992 Lok Sabha election. The Congress party secured 35.10% votes in this election while it had secured 49.27% votes in 1992 Lok Sabha election. The SAD (M) secured 3.85% votes in this election while it had boycotted the 1992 elections. The BJP secured 6.48%, the CPI 1.60%, the CPI (M) 2.68% and the Janata Dal 2.66% votes in this election, while they had secured 16.51%, 1.57%, 3.98% and 2.23% votes respectively in 1992 Lok Sabha election. The independents and others secured 9.56% votes in this election although they had obtained only 4.15% votes in 1992 Lok Sabha election.

### Assembly Segment – Wise Performance of Political Parties

Punjab has 13 Lok Sabha constituencies. Each Lok Sabha constituency has 9 assembly segments. Thus, there are 117 (9 x 13) assembly segments out of which 88 are general and 29 are reserved. The assembly segment-wise performance of political parties in this election has been shown in table no.2.

**Table: 2**

#### Assembly Segment- Wise Performance of Political Parties in 1996 Lok Sabha Elections in Punjab

| Name of the Parties | Lok Sabha Seats Won | Assembly Segments Won |
|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| INC                 | 2                   | 32                    |
| SAD                 | 8                   | 59                    |
| BSP                 | 3                   | 17                    |
| Janata Dal          | -                   | 5                     |
| BJP                 | -                   | 2                     |
| CPI(M)              | -                   | 1                     |
| SAD (MANN)          | -                   | 1                     |
| TOTAL               | 13                  | 117                   |

**SOURCE:- Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, Punjab, Chandigarh, 1996 Lok Sabha Elections of Punjab.**

The table no. 2 indicates that the INC won 2 Lok Sabha seats and led in 32 assembly segments, the SAD won 8 Lok Sabha seats and led in 59 assembly segments, the BSP won 3 Lok Sabha seat and led in 17 assembly segments. Though the Janata Dal, the BJP, the CPI (M) and the SAD (M) could not win any Lok Sabha seat but they led in 5, 2, 1 and 1 assembly segments respectively.

An analysis of the assembly segment-wise performance of the Congress party presented a unique picture. In the 1992 Vidhan Sabha election the Congress party had won 87 assembly seats. However in the 1996 Lok Sabha election it failed to win in as many as 55 assembly segments, while the BSP won 9 assembly seats in 1992 Vidhan Sabha election it increased its lead in as many as 8 more assembly segments in 1996 Lok Sabha election and won total 17 assembly segments.

#### Region - Wise Electoral Performance of Political Parties

Punjab comprises of three distinct geographical regions- Majha (Districts of Amritsar and Gurdaspur), Doaba (Districts of, Jalandhar, Kapurthala, Nawanshar and Hoshiarpur) and Malwa (Districts of Patiala, Ludhiana, Fatehgarh Sahib, Faridkot, Ferozepur, Moga, Muktsar, Sangrur, Ropar, Bathinda, Mansa and Mohali).<sup>7</sup> Out of 13 Lok Sabha seats located in Punjab, 3 Lok Sabha seats (Amritsar, Tarn Taran and Gurdaspur) fall in Majha region, 3 Lok Sabha seats (Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar and Phillaur) fall in Doaba region and the remaining 7 Lok Sabha seats (Patiala, Ropar, Ludhiana, Sangrur, Bathinda, Faridkot and Ferozepur) are located in Malwa region.

The Majha region, which lies sandwiched between the Indo-Pak border in the north and river Beas in the south, contains 27 assembly segments. It is a mixture of Hindu, Sikh and Dalit population. The demographic character of this region made it a traditional stronghold of the Congress party.

The north eastern part of Punjab, Doaba which literally means the land between two rivers, accounts for 27 assembly segments, is traditionally a strong hold of the BSP and the Congress party because of its large concentration of Dalit population.

The southern part of Punjab, Malwa, is geographically the biggest and politically the most significant region of the state which accounts for 63 out of 117 assembly segments of Punjab. Though it has some pockets

of Hindu population but it has traditionally remained a stronghold of the Akalis. Since 1966 all the Chief Ministers of the state except Darbara Singh hailed from Malwa region.

The region-wise electoral performance of political parties in the 1996 Lok Sabha elections of Punjab is recorded in table no. 3.

**Table: 3**

**Region-Wise Electoral Performance of Political Parties in 1996 Lok Sabha Elections in Punjab**

| Political Parties | Majha               |                       | Doaba               |                       | Malwa               |                       |
|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
|                   | Lok Sabha Seats Won | Assembly Segments Won | Lok Sabha Seats Won | Assembly Segments Won | Lok Sabha Seats Won | Assembly Segments Won |
| SAD               | 1                   | 9                     | 1                   | 5                     | 6                   | 45                    |
| INC               | 2                   | 12                    | -                   | 10                    | -                   | 10                    |
| BSP               | -                   | -                     | 2                   | 12                    | 1                   | 5                     |
| BJP               | -                   | 1                     | -                   | -                     | -                   | 1                     |
| Janata Dal        | -                   | 5                     | -                   | -                     | -                   | -                     |
| CPI(M)            | -                   | -                     | -                   | -                     | -                   | 1                     |
| SAD (M)           | -                   | -                     | -                   | -                     | -                   | 1                     |
| Total             | 3                   | 27                    | 3                   | 27                    | 7                   | 63                    |

**SOURCE :- Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, Punjab, Chandigarh, 1996 Lok Sabha Elections of Punjab.**

The above table no.3 indicates that in the Majha region the INC won 2 out of 3 Lok Sabha seats (Gurdaspur & Amritsar) and secured success in 12 out of 27 assembly segments, the SAD won remaining one Lok Sabha seat Tarn Taran and led in 9 assembly segments, the BJP and the Janata Dal could not win any Lok Sabha seat from this region but they led in 1 and 5 assembly segments respectively.

In the Doaba region, the BSP won 2 Lok Sabha seats and led in 12 assembly segments. The SAD won the remaining Jalandhar Lok Sabha seat from this region and led in 5 assembly segments. The INC failed to win even a single Lok Sabha seat but led in 10 assembly segments from this region.

In the Malwa region, the SAD won 6 Lok Sabha seats (Ropar, Patiala, Sangrur, Bathinda, Ludhiana and Faridkot) and led in 45 assembly segments. The BSP won remaining 1 Lok Sabha seat of Ferozepur and led in 5 assembly segments from this region. The Congress failed to win even a single Lok Sabha seat but led in 10 assembly segments from this region. The BJP, the CPI (M) and the SAD (M) with out securing even a single Lok Sabha seat led in 1 assembly segments each from this region.

The region based analysis of 1996 Lok Sabha election in Punjab makes it clear that whatever may be the overall performance of different political parties in Punjab in this election each of them relatively performed good in their traditional stronghold and vice-versa.

**Reasons for Performance of Political Parties in 1996 Lok Sabha Election in Punjab**

The main reasons for this performance of political parties were as under:-

1. Intra-party tussle and acute factionalism in the Punjab Congress at the time of 1996 Lok Sabha election between the two groups i.e. one led by Rajinder Kaur Bhattal and another by Harcharn Singh Brar became the major reason for the defeat of the Congress party in this Lok Sabha election Punjab.<sup>8</sup> Though, the central leadership of the party appointed Varinder Kataria (a non-Punjabi) as President of PPCC before 1996 Lok Sabha election but he also could not maintain unity in the Punjab Congress.
2. Lack of strong leadership was also a reason for the poor performance of the Congress party in this election. After the assassination of Beant Singh in August 1995, Harcharn Singh Brar became the Chief- Minister of the Punjab. He proved to be a weak Chief- Minister as well as a weak mass leader. He could not give proper and strong leadership to Punjab Congress being a Chief- Minister as

- compared to Beant Singh. Therefore, the Congress party due to the lack of proper leadership could not perform well and lost its credibility in 1996 Lok Sabha election.
3. Change is the law of nature. The people wanted change after sometime. The Congress had been in power since 1992. Despite being in power it failed to improve the economy of the state and control corruption. During this regime people were facing many problems on almost all fronts. The non-performance of the Congress government in the state prior to these elections changed the opinion of the people in favour of the SAD. Therefore, incumbency was one of the reasons that led to its poor performance in this Lok Sabha election.
  4. Hawala scandal at the central level was the major reason for the defeat of the Congress party in this election. It was being alleged that many cabinet ministers of the Congress led government at the centre included Prime Minister P.V. Narsimha Rao had made huge amount of money through this scandal.<sup>9</sup> Hawala scandal changed the opinion of the masses against the Congress and in favour of the alternative party to manage the country in 1996 Lok Sabha election.
  5. The populist promises of the SAD like abolition of Octroi, elimination of corruption and free electricity to farmers could partly be attributed to the success of the SAD in 1996 Lok Sabha election in Punjab.
  6. The SAD contested 1996 Lok Sabha election in alliance with the BSP. Because of this electoral adjustment with the BSP, the Scheduled Castes voted in large numbers for the SAD candidates.<sup>10</sup> With the help of Scheduled Caste voters the SAD won 8 Lok Sabha seats and with the help of the SAD, the BSP won 3 Lok Sabha seats in this election.
  7. In 1996 Lok Sabha elections the BJP declared that it supported the SAD candidates on 4 Lok Sabha seats in Punjab because the SAD had supported BJP candidates in Delhi Vidhan Sabha elections which were held in 1993. Therefore, this electoral support of the BJP benefited the SAD in 1996 Lok Sabha elections on 4 Lok Sabha seats i.e. Faridkot, Bathinda, Ropar and Tarn Taran.
  8. During these elections the Congress party candidates always went to the voters with a big number of security personnel, which had made a negative effect on the minds of the voters.
  9. The policy of liberalization adopted by the Congress government at the centre in 1991 also had an adverse effect in Punjab. Many sections of society were hit very hard by it. This naturally caused a reaction against the Congress in 1996 Lok Sabha election in Punjab. The Jat Sikh middle peasantry was severally affected by the policy of liberalization which had to a sharp increase in the costs of fertilizer and pesticides. The Hindu traders were also adversely affected by it. Their profits were hit by growing contracted procurements by Agri-Business and by the emergence of large trading companies.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, both of these classes turned against the Congress and switched over their support to the SAD in this election.

In conclusion it may be stated that the 1996 Lok Sabha election in Punjab were held in a peaceful manner in which people overwhelmingly exercised their franchise. The SAD-BSP alliance and the Congress were major competitors in this election. The SAD-BSP performed very well due to great support given by all sections of the society against the non-performance of the Congress party government. The Congress lost as its state leadership lacked the will to win as a united team. The SAD's dominant position in the state politics got revived.

### References and Notes

1. Kuldeep Kaur, Akali Dal in Punjab Politics: Split and Merger, Deep and Deep Publications, New Delhi, 1999, p. 110.
2. Jamshid Ali Khan and Rajinder Kaur, Non-Voting In 1992 Punjab Vidhan Sabha Elections- A Study of Two Constituencies, A Project Submitted to the ICSSR, New Delhi, 2000, p.46.
3. The Akali factions which boycotted the 1992 elections were Akali Dal (Mann) headed by Simranjit Singh Mann, Akali Dal (Badal) headed by Parkash Singh Badal, Akali Dal (Baba) under the President-ship of Baba Joginder Singh, father of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwala and the Babbar Akali Dal whose chieftain was Kartar Singh Narang. Later Akali Dal (Panthak Khalsa) which was headed

by Rajdev Singh, a member of ninth Lok Sabha, also decided not to participate in the elections. The only Akali Dal which declared participation in the elections was Akali Dal (Kabul).

4. Statistical Report on 1996 Lok Sabha Elections of Punjab, Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, Punjab, Chandigarh, 1996, p. 29.
5. Ibid., p. 28.
6. Ibid., p. 31.
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