

The Shiromani Akali Dal, with all its recent efforts to broaden the support base in urban Punjab by building infrastructure, increasing road and air connectivity and tackling the endemic power crisis, cannot simply afford to annoy its core constituency: the Jat Sikh peasantry
Punjab: Traditional vs elite politics

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THE removal of Manpreet Singh Badal from the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Cabinet as Finance Minister of Punjab on the charges of "persistent acts of indiscipline and opposing the publicly endorsed pro-people policies of the party and the government", ostensibly at the behest of Deputy Chief Minister and party president Sukhbir Badal, has brought the Akali rebel to the centre stage of Punjab politics at the moment.

Has it been merely the culmination of a long-term tussle between the siblings for being the 'natural inheritor' of an ageing Badal senior a la Thakre family in Maharashtra or Karunanidhi family in Tamil Nadu, or are there substantive issues involved also in this still unfolding political saga having long-term ramifications for the party and the beleaguered state? What does the event tell us about the way



Manpreet Badal: The challenger



Sukhbir Badal: Chief Minister-in-waiting

electoral politics operates in the state? How to make sense of the contrasting mode of politics and leadership style of the two main protagonists engaged in a battle that has really just begun?

Without going much into details, let us refer to the contentious 'issue related to Punjab finances' that led Manpreet Badal, a 'born Akali' in his own words to put his 'entire political career at stake' to serve the 'best interests of Punjab and Punjabis'. What Manpreet Badal is saying or has been saying for long is fairly known and whose veracity cannot be denied even by his detractors. That Punjab, once considered the 'model state' of India for long thanks to the success of capital intensive/technology driven Green Revolution, has for considerable period now been experiencing deceleration in terms of economic growth is a irrefutable fact.

Symptomatic of the economic malaise that has gradually set in the state irrespective of political regimes, the state has over the years accumulated a staggering debt

burden is also known even if only the 'fully informed' citizens may be knowing till recently that the total debt at the moment stands at a whopping Rs 70,000 crore and the state government is paying around Rs 8,000 crore as interest only. It goes without saying that if it does not mend its ways by raising resources and cutting its expenses, the state is likely to default on its repayment in the near future.

The ruling political class explains the predicament of Punjab, especially its ever-increasing debt, by putting forth three oft-repeated 'explanations': first, the state paid a heavy economic price on account of its more than a decade-old fight against militancy as it not only became debt-ridden as a result but also experienced a flight of capital from the borderland state. The fight was for national unity and integrity and for the nation's security.

Secondly, investments that dried up during the conflict period have not picked up till date as the neighbouring hill states have been doling out incentives to potential investors thanks to the special category status accorded to them by the Centre. Thirdly, the debt has also accumulated due to the heavy subsidies being given to farmers who, in turn, have contributed to the nation's cause by replenishing its food grains stocks year after year ensuring food security.

Ironically, when finally the Centre reportedly did offer to bail out the state from the crisis by agreeing to adjust part of the debt due to the persistent efforts of the now sacked Finance Minister, the Akali Dal rather than lapping up the offer has gone into ferment. Why?

It is not only because, as has been insinuated, that if the 'deal' would have been clinched then the credit would have gone entirely to the leadership of Manpreet Badal, the 'challenger' in the mould of custodian of 'Punjabi pride', adding to his already high-profile stature of a leader with 'saintly idiom' to the detriment of the leadership aspirations of his Chief Minister-in-waiting cousin, a quintessential Punjabi politician, known and grudgingly appreciated even by his detractors for his 'rough and ready' but effective mode of organisational politics.

If it would have been so, then why should the known Sukhbir Badal's baiters like Amarinder Singh or Rajinder Kaur Bhattal, both top leaders of the rival Congress waiting in the wings for the impending 2012 elections, would vehemently criticise Manpreet Badal, the 'lone ranger'? Allegations of being 'anti-party'/'anti-people' have essentially been in response to Manpreet Badal's uncritical support to the economic reforms measures being suggested by the Centre as 'pre-conditions' in lieu of the proposed economic package. The measures, aimed at diminishing the state's expenditure and raising additional resources include a reduction in the power subsidies, privatisation of the loss-making PSUs, bringing the local bodies under audit by CAG, raising the transportation charges and finally a check on the withdrawal of sums from the provident fund.

A four-time MLA and long-term member of the political affairs committee, Manpreet Badal would be critically aware that the fragmented nature of Punjab electoral politics has made it imperative for the leaders who shape the form and content of their party agenda/manifesto, tenor of election campaigns and also decide about important matters of alliance building and modes of distribution of patronage, to prioritise the party's electoral survival while contemplating policy options even at the cost of the perceived long-term gains for the state.

The Akali Dal, like its rival Congress, has been emphasising its unambiguous commitment to economic reforms in its election manifesto, however, fearful of the backlash of the numerically strong and land-owning Jat Sikh peasantry -- its core constituency -- has simply been unable to roll back the huge anti-reform subsidies in the form of free water and electricity being doled out in the name of common good.

Moreover, the Akali Dal, unlike the rival Congress, has a limited social support base that has made an electoral alliance with the BJP a matter of compulsion for the party, howsoever an 'unnatural' alliance it is. The Sukhbir Badal-led Akali Dal with all its recent efforts to broaden the support base in urban Punjab by building urban infrastructure, increasing road and air connectivity and tackling the endemic power crisis, cannot simply afford to annoy its core constituency, especially at this stage in a state where religion, caste, region and leadership factors combine differently in different elections ensuring the change of power in every elections held in the post-1966 Punjab.

Notwithstanding the rhetoric about a shift in the electoral agenda from identity to development and good governance, the Akali Dal would thus be contented to stay with the 'mass politics' based on ethnic populism devoid of programmatic efforts for the sake of electoral mobilisation and gains.

An unusual leader like Manpreet Badal, who no longer seems willing to tread the beaten path and has come out as an unabashed reformist/moderniser, is essentially catering to 'elite politics' addressing the deep concerns of the burgeoning educated urban middle class citizenry as well the entrepreneurial class in the state who read English language newspapers, watch informed debates on TV and have an access to the internet and Facebook and yearn for the 'game changer'.

Do these 'new' classes have a wider socio-political and economic policy impact than what their actual size suggests in contemporary Punjab? Does the heat and dust of mass politics that defines the elections in Punjab encourage such a significant departure even at the present moment of a grave crisis? How would the powerful Jat Sikh landed peasantry react? Whether the 'new' youthful leader would succeed in actually affecting a discernable shift in the political and economic agenda of Punjab or simply walk into political oblivion, no one can say at the moment.

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