

The Political Scenario in Punjab and the Coming Elections

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The bugle for the forthcoming election to the Punjab Legislative Assembly has already been sounded. This time it seems to be a keen fight not only between the two rival political parties but also between the two towering political stalwarts who have dominated the political scene in Punjab from two different constituencies.

Negative Vote:

In the last elections, people's mandate in favour of the Congress was more on account of the negative vote which was against the Shiromani Akal Dal and not for any known merits or virtues of the Congress. For the first time in the post independence period, the Shiromani Akal Dal got an opportunity to complete its full term of five years. It was a period of test and trial for Parkash Singh Badal who had often asserted that a full term, with the reins of party and the government at his command, would provide him the opportunity to usher in a socio-economic revolution in the state. But he failed to rise to the occasion and prove worthy of people's mandate. The party which had tried to demonstrate its strength through bandhs and peaceful morchas for espousing the politico-economic issues of the state stood mute, discredited and apathetic. The Akali-BJP alliance failed to provide healing balm to people baffled and bewildered by a decade-long phase of bloodshed, violence and vengeance.

Hegemonic agenda of Chief Minister Badal, who also remained the aging party president, was aimed at pursuing policies which feathered his own nest. While nepotism and corruption became rampant in the state, the SAD-BJP alliance fared no better than the earlier Congress regimes, as far as addressing the politico-economic issues was concerned. SAD lacked conviction and commitment and could not prevail upon the BJP government at the Centre to find an amicable and enduring solution to the varied problems facing the state. The Akalis found it difficult to take off their muddy boots after signing the Rajiv-Longowal Accord which was nothing but a retrogressive step. They started their term in a muddle, with hardly any agenda and ended it in a bigger muddle, making people realize that mere promises, without action are empty and futile. This is how people were compelled to give their mandate in favour of the Congress.

The Congress, under the leadership of the Capt. Amarinder Singh, did try to shake the old dust from its feet and seemed to have learnt a few lessons from the past mistakes due to which the state was driven from one disaster to another. The change of outlook between the old and the new Congress leadership became noticeable. The party did ponder over the state's manifold problems, made complex and still more complex through years of procrastination, sham negotiations, unilateral Awards and deceptive Accords.

Dynamic:

Capt. Amarinder Singh embarked upon the path of opening new channels for bold and dynamic action. The Termination of River-waters Agreement Act was hailed as a landmark in the recent history of Punjab. It was a step taken with unshakable conviction and absolute confidence without mincing words. In spite of criticism from certain quarters, the C.M. grew in stature and he endeared himself to all well-wishers of Punjab. He proved that he had something specific to contribute to the trouble-torn state, where the crucial issue of water and hydel power had defied a negotiated settlement for so long. But even as the Chief Minister has proved his bonafides, he has not emerged as a leader of the masses.

Isolation:

With too much dependence on the bureaucracy and a chosen set of advisers, he remains alienated from the common people. The party also lacks grass-root workers who can consolidate party's vote bank enabling it to emerge as a genuinely bigger player in the game. The party cannot afford to repeat its 'historic blunders' which led to its alienation from the people, especially in the Punjab countryside. Captain also needs to decentralize his power and share it with other team mates and party workers.

Rampant Corruption:

On the eve of polls, the need for addressing the long pending regional issues is increasingly emerging as an absolute necessity. Peace-loving people of Punjab, disturbed and distressed by the ugly phase of violence have begun to see things in the right perspective. They want the economy of the state to rest on even keels. They are sick of corruption which neither the Akali-BJP alliance nor the Congress has been able to root out. As far as common people are concerned, 'whatever is best administered is the best.' Their topmost priorities are neat and clean administration and peace grounded in justice and fair play. As the two parties are poised for a tough electoral battle, leadership in Punjab must rise to the occasion in a spirit of sincerity, and clear the mess created by decades of mishandling, wrong manoeuvring and unworthy motives.

Suicides:

Of the most crucial significance are the issues of rural indebtedness, inflation, unemployment and poverty. Better healthcare and quality education are also the need of the hour. It is a pity that the fate of peasantry, the life blood of Punjab, is still in the doldrums. Thousands of desperate farmers have committed suicide. No government, Akali or Congress, has initiated policies and programmes to ameliorate the lot of farmers. Punjab needs a definite perspective on farmer-related problems and an integrated approach to human resource development in the state. Agro-based industries can not only provide boost to agriculture but can also provide the benefits of growth, employment and development to all sections of society. There is an urgent need to rejuvenate the state's economy which has been in a shambles for such a long time. People in Punjab are clamouring for a truly representative and responsible leadership which could restore the state's status of being the most prosperous state in the country. The two stalwarts in the game should chalk out new and progressive blue-prints for the state.

Conclusion:

Hopefully, a new pattern of politics has begun to unfold and develop, calling for the highest good of public at large. It must gather impetus to push the state on the path of peace, progress and prosperity. At a time when the Indo-Pak peace process has started gaining good momentum, Punjab has a crucial role to play in delivering and maintaining peace. People would like healthy democratic process to take firm roots in Punjab. It is hoped that in the game of competitive politics, the two players will not indulge in mud-slinging and smear campaign, as was witnessed in the last election and thereafter.

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