

Assembly of Youth

The 2007 election has brought about an unusually high number of new and young faces in the 117-member assembly, underscoring a generational shift in the state's power politics

Ramesh Vinayak

On March 15, when the newly-elected Punjab legislators gathered in the high-ceiling, circular Assembly Hall to take oath of office, the treasury and opposition sides looked like mirror images of the last House in terms of their numbers. A cursory glance at the principal players – the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) – BJP combine and the Congress – said they had nothing but swapped their seats after five years. But a closer look revealed the striking change in the House's composition: an unusually high number of new and young faces, underscoring a generational shift in Punjab power politics.

By all counts, the 2007 elections have thrown up a brand new order in the legislative leadership. As many as 44 first-time MLAs have entered the portals of the 117-member Vidhan Sabha – a record-high in its 60-year-old history. More significantly, 39 MLAs – one-third of the total strength – are less than 45 years old. Educated at some of the best institutes in India and abroad, they are driven more by ideas than ideology. Many of them have a well-heeled political lineage, but they prefer to swear by their sharp learning curves, spawning a new hope for the state in desperate need of recovery on key indicators of socio-economic development.

It has been a tectonic shift cutting across party lines. However, in no other party is this change more visible than SAD, which had, for too long, been likened to an 'old-age home' due to the abundance of septuagenarians and octogenarians in its ranks.

The prime mover in SAD's generational makeover has been Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal's son and Faridkot MP Sukhbir Singh Badal who is credited with assiduously working on a younger profile of the party as part of his carefully-crafted strategy to bolster his credentials and claim as heir apparent to the aging Akali supremo. Close on the heels of SAD's return to power, its apex Political Affairs Committee elevated Badal junior as the acting president of the party, acknowledging his stellar role in anchoring it to victory. At 45, Sukhbir has become the youngest leader to head SAD in its eight-decade-old history.

SAD's tryst with a younger profile has, in part, been by default. For, the defeat of many of the party's old guard in the elections has paved the way for emergence of fresh blood. Parkash, 81, may be one of the oldest chief ministers in the country, but his front bench in the Assembly consists of a number of young cabinet ministers. Leading the power pack of new Akali leadership is Manpreet Singh Badal, 43, Bar-at-Law from London, as the finance minister. A four-time MLA, Manpreet faces the daunting task of steering the state economy that is growing at a dismal rate of 5 per cent compared to the national figure of 8 per cent, and meeting the party's fund-guzzling populist promises. His immediate task is to earmark Rs 400 crore a year to fulfill the SAD's promise of providing subsidised *atta-daal* to the poor – a scheme which is proving trickier to implement than what SAD had imagined. But Manpreet is determined not to lose sight of the bigger picture and swears to play the big stake game to reverse the state's socio-economic slowdown. "We will think out of the box instead of lording over Punjab which is going down," he says, peppering his cogent conversation with quotes of John F. Kennedy.

Significantly, marking a clean break from the Panthic-oriented politics that has been the Akali credo in the past, the younger Akalis are more at ease talking about economics and enterprise. "It's not an agitation-oriented generation," says Chandigarh-based political analyst Pramod Kumar. "Economics is their religion."

Indeed, quick to script their priorities, the young Akali ministers have got into the business of

governance in right earnest. “We are a more passionate lot and are eager to show quick results,” says Parminder Singh Dhindsa, 33, a Master in Business Management. A three-time MLA and son of senior Akali leader Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa, Parminder, as the Public Works Department (PWD) minister, has set the ball rolling on the World Bank funded Rs 1,200-crore road augmentation project. Keen to employ his educational credentials in governance, he has sought the World Bank inputs on information system to improve PWD’s efficiency and to soften the adverse impact of the high toll tax on the state highways. “Hailing from a political family makes me work harder on my first ministerial assignment,” says a soft-spoken Parminder.

A formidable legacy is what prompted suave and party-hopping Bikramjit Singh Majithia to enter into politics. Elected as a first-timer from Majithia, he could not have expected a better birthday gift as he was rewarded with a Cabinet berth on March 2, a day after he turned 32. A graduate from St. Stephen’s in Delhi, he was looking after the sales segment of his family’s Rs 500-crore business when his brother-in-law Sukhbir initiated him into politics six years ago.

As the youngest minister holding the portfolios of Public Health and Information and Public Relations, Majithia talks about introducing corporate-style accountability in government functioning. “Unlike traditional Akalis, we have no fixed ideas but my values and thoughts are closer to the rural roots,” he says with a I-mean-business flourish. His immediate priority is implementation of the Rs 1,280-crore rural water supply project. “My exposure and expertise in corporate practices is a big plus in the business of governance,” he adds.

Even the younger MLAs in the Opposition Congress are exuding new confidence. For the first time, the impact of Punjabi NRIs on the Assembly elections has been pretty direct. None illustrates this better than Jasbir Singh Khangura, 43-year-old Oxford graduate in medicine, who gave up his British citizenship to contest as a Congress nominee from his native Kila Raipur in Ludhiana district and won a seat that the Akalis had never lost. Much before the Assembly elections, Khangura has set up a web-based information database mapping his constituency which later proved to be an effective communication tool in campaigning. “In India, the impact a well-intentioned legislator can make on the average people’s life is great,” says Khangura in impeccable English. “Uplifting the landless families and raising the income of small farmers in Kila Raipur will be my priorities,” he says.

Their political divide notwithstanding, the young generation of the MLAs are keen to make common cause on Punjab’s overarching concerns on economy and development. “We are on the same page on the state’s larger issues,” says Sukhpal Singh Khaira, 42, first-time Congress MLA and an articulate voice in the Assembly debates. “Being in the Opposition is an opportunity to rise in the party ranks,” says the alumnus of Shimla’s Bishop Cotton School and the son of a one-time hardcore Akali leader.

Taking a refreshing break from the eye-for-an-eye politics which has invariably consumed Punjab, Manpreet has even extended an olive branch to the Opposition. “The Punjab economy is sacred, and we can fight political battles on other fronts,” he says.

Clearly, the leadership transition has come of age in Punjab. And, it’s an opportune time for transforming the sunshine state. For GenNext, it presents both a challenge and an opportunity to make its mark.

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[Courtesy: *India Today*]

‘I’m no hypocrite’

Priyanka Dasgupta

Mandira Bedi made head-lines last April. Members of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee took offence to a tattoo of *Eik onkar* – a Sikh religious symbol – that she wears on her back. The committee even sought an apology from Mandira.

Mandira's husband said he was unaware of the issue. "She has been wearing this tattoo for three years. *Eik onkar* is the first Word in the Sikh religion. When she first decided to wear a tattoo, she chose that symbol. Yet, I wouldn't want to comment on this issue any further."

'Mandira is a proud Sardarni'

Navjyot Singh Sidhu supports Mandira

I know Mandira will never do anything to hurt religious sentiments. I think SGPC could ask her for an explanation to find out what her actual intentions were. Anyone who wears a tattoo is particularly proud of the symbol. At times, lack of knowledge about Sikh ethics could lead to an act of this kind. Remember that controversy with Harbhajan Singh when he shot an ad with his hair down? I think today Harbhajan would never do something like this because he understands that he is a role model and such acts might lead to miscommunication with the masses.

I don't wish to get involved in religious affairs. One only needs to ascertain the real intent behind Mandira's act. Even when I was playing, there was a controversy involving me fielding while wearing a cap. Caps were not allowed in the Sikh religion. While fielding, caps help to keep the sun away. Hence, I used to wear a cap. But when I was called by Gurcharan Singh and told not to wear a cap because it was hurting the sentiments of people, I paid heed to the suggestion. Frankly speaking, not wearing the cap didn't hinder my performance. Being a staunch Sikh, I will not do anything at the cost of hurting sentiments. Mandira is a proud *sardarni* and will not do anything to hurt sentiments.

[Courtesy: *Hindustan Times*]

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