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## Punjab Vidhan Sabha Elections 2017 and 2022: Analysis of the worst performance of Shiromani Akali Dal

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### Abstract

The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) is the main regional political party of Punjab which came into existence before the independence of the country. It has historically represented the interests of the Sikh community and has been a key player in the Punjab political landscape since the reorganization of the state in 1966. The party, which had been dominant force in the Punjab politics for decades, suffered an awful decline after the Punjab Vidhan Sabha Elections 2017 and 2022. The SAD won 15 seats in 2017 Assembly elections and failed to don itself with the opposition party status. In Punjab Assembly polls 2022, SAD won only 3 seats, which is its worst-ever electoral performance since its inception in 1920s. This research paper seeks to analyze the reasons behind the complete rout of the SAD. This decline was due to a combination of internal party defection, shifting public sentiment and growing discontent over its alliance with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which alienated many Sikh voters. Furthermore, the poor handling of issues such as farm distress, drug addiction, sand mafia and the sacrilege incidents eroded its support base drastically. Besides this, the emergence of new political party, the Aam Aadami Party (AAP), also played a crucial role in diminishing the SAD's dominance in the state.

**Keywords:** Shiromani Akali Dal, Punjab Vidhan Sabha Elections, Support Base, AAP, Decline

### Introduction

Elections are the backbone of democracy and are the medium through which people reflect their beliefs, faith, attitudes, and values towards their political system. Electoral politics paves the way to increase political consciousness among citizens and encourages them to participate in political process. Political parties try to secure political power during elections, as elections give them legitimacy to rule or govern. Elections are the most significant channel of communication between the people and their government <sup>[1]</sup>.

Democracy and elections are the two sides of the same coin. Each election features a unique set of electoral problems, manifestos, campaign strategies, slogans, and voting patterns etc. Elections highlight major public issues and problems of the people and also analyze the party system of a country. The elections are the only method through which power can be transferred peacefully and systematically. It is impossible to imagine contemporary political representative democracies without the presence and functioning of political parties. Parties provide people the opportunity to participate in politics and give them the chance to have an impact on political outcomes.

India being a federal state, elections has been held at national and state level to elect centre and state governments. India has a multi-party system, both the national and regional political parties play important role in the electoral politics of the country. The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) is a prominent regional political party in India, primarily associated with the Sikh community and the state of Punjab. Founded in 1920, it has played a crucial role in shaping the political landscape of the region, advocating for the rights and welfare of Sikhs. The party's roots trace back to the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), which was established to manage Sikh religious institutions <sup>[2]</sup>. The word 'Akali' has been derived from 'Akal', which has its origin in the Sanskrit word Kal (Time). Thus, the meaning of 'Akali' is one who 'does not die'. So, Akali Dal means 'the party of immortals' <sup>[3]</sup>. Over the years, the SAD has been at the forefront of key political movements, particularly those advocating for Sikh identity and autonomy. The party's ideology blends Sikh religious

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principles with the demands of regional autonomy within India's federal system<sup>[4]</sup>. Its influence has extended beyond Punjab, with its advocacy for Sikh rights resonating across the diaspora. It has formed several state governments in Punjab, often in alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), though it has also operated independently. However, the party has also faced challenges, including internal divisions, controversies, and its evolving relationship with other political entities. The party who ruled the state several times faced a serious setback after the 2017 and 2022 assembly polls. Many factors were the responsible for the poor performance of the party in these elections.

### Analysis of the result of Punjab Vidhan Sabha Elections 2017

Table 1 showed the number of seats won by the political parties in Punjab assembly Polls 2017. Indian National Congress proved it again that it is one of the strongest party in the state by winning 77 seats with 38.5% vote share. On the other hand, AAP won 20 seats with 23.7% vote share and became the second largest party by leaving behind the oldest regional party of Punjab i.e. SAD. Shiromani Akali Dal and its ruling alliance party BJP won 15 and 3 seats respectively. SAD scored the 25.2% vote share and BJP got the 5.4%, while rest of other parties vote share was only 6.9%. The election results clearly depict the decline of Shiromani Akali Dal who won only 15 seats as comparative to 56 seats in 2012 Punjab Assembly polls and suffered a big loss of 41 seats. The emergence of AAP marked the end of bipolar party politics in which there was always a direct contest between traditional political parties of Punjab i.e.; SAD and INC. However, AAP registered its presence in the electoral politics of Punjab earlier in 2014 Lok Sabha Elections by winning 4 seats.

**Table 1:** Result of Punjab Vidhan Sabha Elections 2017

Name of the Party	No. of seats won
Indian National Congress(INC)	77
Aam Aadami Party (AAP)	20
Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)	15
Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP)	3
Lok Insaaf Party (LIP)	2
Total	117

**Source:** Election Commission of India (ECI)

### Analysis of the result of Punjab Vidhan Sabha Elections 2022

Table 2 depicts the results of Punjab Vidhan Sabha elections 2022 in which AAP registered a landslide victory. Since the reorganization of Punjab in 1966, no single political party won as many seats as AAP won 92 seats in the 2022 assembly elections on its own. However, Congress won 87 seats in the 1992 Punjab Vidhan Sabha elections because of the boycott of elections by the major factions of Akali Dal. On the other hand, SAD won only 3 seats. It was the worst ever electoral performance of SAD since its inception in 1920s. INC won only 18 seats with its shrunk vote share of 22.98%. BSP and BJP won 1 and 2 seats respectively. Another one seat was won by independent candidate who is the son of Congress Leader Rana Gurjit Singh.

**Table 2:** Result of Punjab Assembly Polls 2022

Name of the Party	No. of seats won
Aam Aadami Party (AAP)	92
Indian National Congress(INC)	18
Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)	3
Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP)	2
Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)	1
Independent	1
Total	117

**Source:** Election Commission of India (ECI)

### Factors responsible for decline of Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)

The process of decline of SAD started with its poor performance in 2017 Punjab assembly polls and the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. 2022 Punjab Vidhan Sabha elections registered complete rout of the main regional political party. The major factors behind the decline of SAD are:

- Corruption and Mafia-Raj during SAD-BJP Government (2007-2017):** During the decade of SAD's governance, there was a substantial rise in crime and corruption within the state. Even the mafia style corruption related to sand, transport, cable or liquor flourished in the state in which politicians of Akali Dal were involved<sup>[5]</sup>. Key leaders from the SAD-BJP alliance were accused of monopolizing various businesses across the state. The Badal family, in particular, faced intense scrutiny from the opposition due to their extensive business interests. According to the report of Indian Express, 'Punjab is also notoriously known for its liquor mafia. While the SAD-BJP government has been ruling the state, there has been a huge hike in the number of murders related to illicit liquor trade in Punjab'<sup>[6]</sup>.
- Anti-incumbency:** According to CSDS Data report people of Punjab felt that the drug addiction and *goondagardi* in the state during the last five years (2012-17) has been increased. Hence people showed their clear disliking for the incumbent government. In response to the question, "Should the incumbent government get another chance?", 62% respondents wanted that the incumbent government of SAD must go<sup>[7]</sup>.
- Drug Issue:** Drug issue emerged as one of the major issue during the 2017 and 2022 Punjab Vidhan Sabha Elections. The opposition parties claimed that the SAD-BJP government is responsible for the drug trafficking in Punjab as party's senior leader Bikramjeet Singh Majithiya name was dragged in the issue. The people of Punjab were and are of the firm view that the powerful Badal Family and its closed relatives were allegedly in drug peddling<sup>[8]</sup>. During the CSDS-NES survey 58.7% respondents believed that SAD led coalition government failed to check the rampant drug trade, which had ruined the lives of thousands of youth in the state. On the other hand, 30.8% respondents have strong faith that Congress party can tackle this problem<sup>[10]</sup>.
- Factionalism in the Party:** Another key factor behind the decline of the SAD is factionalism within the party. The party faced a significant blow when several prominent leaders, including Manjinder Singh Sirsa, Sewa Singh Sekhwan, Ranjit Singh Brahmampura, and others, left the party. Some of them went on to form their own parties, while others joined different political

parties. The resentment among the leaders began when Parkash Singh Badal handed over control of the party to his son, Sukhbir Singh Badal, sidelining many senior leaders. This decision annoyed many senior leaders such as Brahampura, Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa, Ratan Singh Ajnala, and Manpreet Singh Badal. The internal rift among the party leaders significantly weakened the SAD <sup>[10]</sup>.

- **Nepotism:** The entrenched control of the Badal family over the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) emerged as a significant factor contributing to the party's persistent decline. Since 1997, Badal and his close relatives dominated not only the party and government but also undermined the autonomy of key institutions such as the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) and Akal Takht. This nepotism has faced strong criticism from opposition parties as well as Taksali leaders within the Akali Dal. The perceived erosion of the SGPC's independence led to the perception that it had become a financial arm of the SAD. The party, once known for its cadre-based structure and ideological orientation, has now been reduced to a 'family party' <sup>[11]</sup>.
- **Sacrilege Issue:** The issue of the sacrilege of Sri Guru Granth Sahib during the tenure of the SAD-BJP coalition government in Punjab was another significant factor that tarnished the image of the Akali Dal. The subsequent police firing, which resulted in the deaths of two individuals protesting against the sacrilege, further exacerbated the situation for the party. The Sikh community's outrage reached unprecedented levels due to the SAD's perceived mishandling of such a sensitive matter, which deeply offended the sentiments of the Sikh Sangat <sup>[12]</sup>.
- **Shift in traditional support base of SAD:** The mass support base of Akali Dal was the Sikh rural peasantry as well as the urban Sikh trading classes, whereas the Jatt peasantry is the backbone of its support base upto 1960. Another important feature of Akali Dal's support base is that party has always performed better in Malwa region as comparative to Majha and Doaba regions of Punjab, because Malwa region has more sikh population than the Majha and Malwa region <sup>[13]</sup>. SAD lost its traditional vote bank during these 2017 and 2022 assembly polls. The inability of SAD-BJP coalition government to capture the main culprits of desecration of the Guru Granth Sahib in different regions of Punjab and attempt to gain the support of Dera Sacha Sauda just before the 2017 elections irritated the rural Sikh voters. In 2022 assembly election Sikh peasantry annoyed with the initial support of SAD to the BJP led centre government on three farm laws.
- **Issue of Dera Sacha Sauda:** The image of the party completely destroyed after granting the pardon to head of the Dera Sacha Sauda in order to get the support of followers of Dera in the coming 2017 assembly elections. The public outrage was on its peak and people highly criticized the immaturity of the party leaders. As party portrayed itself as the *panthic party* since its inception, seeking the support of an 'anti - Sikh' institution just to increase its electoral dividends damaged the party reputation immensely.
- **Lack of Internal Democracy within the Party:** There is a lot of anger among the party people against the

*Badal's dictatorship. Badals* strangled the democratic process in the party organization by controlling every single decision in the party and left no space for other leaders in the party. This arrogant behavior of the *Badals* proved fatal for the party as many senior leaders left the party <sup>[14]</sup>.

- **Agrarian issue and Three farm bills:** One of the notable reason behind the decline of SAD is its failure to address the problem of economic decline in the post green revolution period. Farmer suicides had been another burning issue in the 2017 assembly elections as farmers are in the deadly trap of debt. The opposition parties accused the SAD for its incompetence to address the issue. INC and AAP promised to solve this issue as Congress promised to waive off the loan of the farmers and AAP launched a special 'Kisan Manifesto' <sup>[15]</sup>. Before the 2022 assembly polls, farmer protest against three farm laws and SAD's initial hesitation to oppose these laws exposed the real face of the party before the people of Punjab.
- **Alliance with BJP:** The SAD's alliance with BJP also became the reason of its unpopularity among the people of Punjab. During the farmers protest in 2020-2021 people had a strong feeling of anger with the BJP party. However, SAD broke its alliance with the BJP during farmers protest, but people still viewed with suspicion because of its closeness with BJP leadership.
- **Emergence of AAP:** The rampant rise of AAP in the electoral politics of Punjab has been proved another cause of declining popularity of SAD. The people were not happy with the rule of SAD as party failed to control the drug issue, *Mafia Raj* in the state, who tilted towards AAP. As a result party became able to win 20 seats in 2017 assembly polls and SAD as a main regional party lagged behind this rookie party. The main reason behind the exceptional victory of AAP in the 2022 assembly polls is the anger of people towards tradition political parties i.e. SAD and INC <sup>[16]</sup>. The increased *groupism*, nepotism and opportunistic behavior of political parties paved the way for AAP to emerge as a third player in the state politics. The internal rift in Congress and anger towards Akali Dal during farmer protest resulted in people's support for AAP. People showed a great faith in Kejriwal's guarantees and Delhi model. Voters just saw the election symbol of AAP <sup>[17]</sup>. Punjab post poll 2022 survey findings highlighted that during the survey 57.2% respondents replied that they paid more attention to the party rather than the candidate. In the reply of the question "which party would be best for the development of the state"? 40.2% respondents favored AAP, only 15.4% replied for the Akali Dal. The victory of AAP attributed to the keen desire for the change and wide scale corruption during SAD and INC rule in the state from 20007-2022 <sup>[18]</sup>.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the decline of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) in the 2017 and 2022 Punjab Vidhan Sabha elections reflects a significant shift in the political landscape of Punjab. The party, which once commanded considerable influence, especially among the Sikh community, has struggled to maintain its dominance due to various factors such as internal divisions, leadership crises, and a failure to

connect with the changing aspirations of the electorate. The 2017 defeat marked the beginning of a decline, as the SAD's alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alienated key voter bases, particularly within the agricultural sector, following the controversial farm laws. In 2022, the SAD's performance worsened, further highlighting the erosion of its traditional voter base and the rise of new political players like the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which captured the youth vote and the disillusioned sections of the electorate. As far as the party's electoral performance in Lok Sabha Elections 2019 and 2024 is concerned, party won only 2 seats and 1 seat respectively. The SAD's inability to adapt these new political dynamics and its failure to address the socio-economic concerns of the people of Punjab has made it increasingly difficult for the party to regain its former political strength. The decline of the Shiromani Akali Dal underscores the volatile and shifting nature of regional politics in Punjab, with new political forces emerging to challenge traditional power structures.

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