

# Shift within Shift: Panthic Agenda to Agenda for Development and Good Governance (Analysis of the Shiromani Akali Dal Manifesto's from 1997 to 2012)

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## Abstract

*Shiromani Akali Dal is a religio-political organisation of the Sikhs. It propagates and promotes religio-political ideology. Akali leadership is of a firm view that politics cannot be run properly without the sanction of the religious authority of the Sikhs and religion cannot be safeguarded without holding political power. So, the ideology of Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) has been driven by the concept of 'Miri and Piri' given by the sixth guru Hargobind Sahib Ji, which indicates that the party believes in the dictum that religion and politics go hand in hand. The SAD has projected itself as a Panthic party with the aim to protect the religious, social, economic and political interests of the Sikhs. From 1997 onwards the SAD's ideology has shifted towards development and good governance. The interesting fact which appeared while studying manifestos of SAD from 1997 onward is that where development remains the prime concern of the party; emotive issues related to ideology, and religion do get mentioned, but in an increasingly subdued manner. An attempt has been made to study this shift with the help of visible literature which is available in the form of party documents manifesto.*

**Key Words:** Agenda Shift, Manifesto, SAD, Congress, BJP, AAP.

## 1. Introduction

Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) is the oldest surviving state level party in India. The party was founded in 1920 shortly after the formation of Shiromani Gurudwara Prabhandhak Committee (SGPC) to act as its political arm to protect the interests of the Sikh community at large. SAD's basic ideology is to protect religious, social, economic and political interests of the dominant group of Punjab i.e Sikhs. SAD's shift in its ideological concerns is visible as one goes through the party literature. After going through the party literature we note there is a shift in the ideology in the sense that ethno-religious issues have been replaced by political economic issues. On the basis of the readings of the Assembly Election manifesto's of the Akali Dal; this paper broadly forwards two arguments:

- a) The SAD ideology consists of two issues since 1997 onwards; one is *Panth Punjab* or *Punjabi* and the second is development. However since 1997 onward the development centred agenda had provided shape to SAD ideology. But the basic part of ideology which is religion had always remained a part of SAD

ideology in a silent manner. The Party has moulded its ideology in the changed context.

- b) Second, the merging of peace with development or good governance agenda favoured the party to recast their image in the eyes of the electorates in the changed context. That is why SAD never played any religious/ identity card in an open manner and tried to hold on strong issues like peace, development and good governance which not only marked the shift in the political ideology of Akali Dal but also in the politics of the State.

In the context of these two arguments, the first part of the paper discusses how religion which is the basic part of SAD ideology also had appeared in their manifestos. It seems that party never played the religious card openly but they moulded their ideology with other things such as the welfare of all. The second part of this paper discusses on the basis of the documents of the party particularly the manifestos which were released by the party on the eve of every election held since 1997 and from which it is clearly visible how the party uses the theme of development as an integral part of their ideology to influence the voters.

This paper is based upon content analysis of parties' manifestos since 1997 to 2012 assembly elections in Punjab. The period has been taken into consideration because in this period there is a drastic change in the electoral agenda of the party in state politics from one election to another. There are many reasons behind the study of manifestos, especially in the post-insurgency period (1997 to 2012). After a long period of militancy, normal life resumed in the 90's in the state. Election was held in the state in 1997 and it was considered a normal election in the state after militancy. The question that arises here is why this election has been considered normal? It was because after 57 months of President's rule in the state, election was conducted under governor rule in 1992 in Punjab. 1992 Assembly election were later boycotted by all Akali groups except only one faction. Akali Dal had argued that in such a critical situation holding of elections would not be legitimate and thus the establishment of a popular government would be impossible. All militant groups had called for the boycott of the elections. The electorates did not support the elections; voters' turnout was very less. Mainly Hindus voted while Sikhs opposed these elections. About 24% of the voters participated in the elections. Congress was the main party in the election field and no other political party was there to compete. After five years of rule of Congress, when elections were held in the state other political parties participated.

In this paper we basically try to explain the shift in the political ideology of SAD after a reading of the party manifestos. We analyse the shift in the agenda of the party in the context of changed situation. When we talk about shift, we find that there is a shift on three agendas: the panthic agenda, peace agenda and development/good governance agenda.

## **2. Panthic Agenda**

Punjab politics is synonymous with Akali Politics. When we talk about Panth, it denotes religion based politics. It revolves around Sikhs, Panth and the Punjabi Language. Historically, Akali Dal was involved in the movement of Sikhs in Punjab to liberate Gurdwaras from the control of the corrupt *Mahants*. For this purpose, on 14th December, 1920 a meeting of the representatives of different *Jathas* was held at Amritsar in which it was decided to name a central organisation as “Shiromani Akali Dal”.<sup>1</sup> Sardar Surmukh Singh Jhabal was elected the first President of Shiromani Akali Dal. Once the primary aim of the SAD in its first years of formation was achieved (the Gurudwaras under the supervision of the SGPC was finally achieved after the passage of All India Gurudwara Act, 1925), SAD became the chief political organisation of the Sikhs.

Akali Dal came into existence with four declared objectives:

- To bring the Sikh religious places under Panthic control
- To abolish the permanent position of the Mahants, thus ending their irresponsibility.
- To utilise the property and income of the Gurudwaras for the purpose for which they were funded.
- To practice Sikh religion according to the teachings of the Sikh Gurus as enshrined in the Adi-Granth<sup>2</sup>

The introduction of communal electorate by the Montague-Chelmsford reforms, 1919 actually allowed the SAD to fight for the seats reserved for the Sikhs in 1937 and 1947 provincial elections, though it could not achieve much success.

After partition Akali Dal emerged as a ‘relevant’ party with the changed demographic scenario of Punjab. Not only the Hindus who were in minority in united colonial Punjab now became a majority community but the Sikhs became the most numerous minority community

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<sup>1</sup> SAD was established as task force of Sikhs to liberate Gurdwaras from the control of corrupt Mahants.

<sup>2</sup> Ajit Singh (2005): *Shiromani Akali Dal Religio-Political Study (1947-90)*, Kaputhala- India: Armaan Publications, p. 32.

now in the state and also now the Sikhs were spatially concentrated and that mattered electorally. SAD now set up two main objectives to achieve: to ensure adequate share for the Sikhs in terms of political Power in post-partition Punjab and to promote Punjabi language in Gurumukhi script.<sup>3</sup> SAD raised the demand for a *Punjabi Suba*, ostensibly on the basis of language but there was a desire to establish a state in which Sikh as a majority community would be able to wield political power.<sup>4</sup> The Party presented its demand before the State re-organisation Commission in 1953 which was not recommended in the face of opposition on the ground that it was a communal demand. Subsequently, SAD launched the Punjabi Suba agitation in 1955, which was temporarily stopped as a result of negotiation with the Congress in Punjab which resulted into a regional formula adopted in Punjab by which the work of the state legislature was assigned to separate regional committees for the Punjabi-speaking regions and Hindi-speaking regions respectively. As a result, the Akali Dal merged with the Congress in 1957.<sup>5</sup> Gradually, Akalis started expressing their dissatisfaction with the working of the Regional Formula and the indifference of the Congress to the demand for Punjabi Suba. SAD was revived and the movement restarted on 29th May. The movement was first led by Master Tara Singh then by by Sant Fateh Singh. The Akali Dal decided to intensify the agitation through passive resistance on a massive scale. A call was sent forth to the rural areas that “panth is in danger and that unless Punjabi Suba was secured there would be no security or protection for that community”.<sup>6</sup> After a long struggle, the goal of Punjabi speaking state was finally achieved on 1<sup>st</sup> November, 1966 under the leadership of Sant Fateh Singh. With the formation of the Punjabi speaking state SAD now emerged as a claimant to political power in the state.

The territorial issues involving reorganization like the status of Chandigarh, river water issue, the Punjabi speaking territory’s merger with the state and over and above all the interference of the centre into state affairs led to the passage of Anandpur Sahib Resolution in 1973. The Resolution aimed to establish the ‘pre-eminence of the Khalsa through the creation of a congenial environment and a political set up’.<sup>7</sup> It became the basis of policies and programmes of the party and led to *Dharm Yudh Morcha* demanding the fulfillment of the

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<sup>3</sup> J S Grewal (1998): ‘ Sikh Identity, the Akalis and Khalistan’ in J S Grewal and Indu Banga, *Punjab in Prosperity and Violence*, New delhi: K K. Publisher .p.74

<sup>4</sup> Ashutosh Kumar (2004): Electoral Politics in Punjab: Study of Akali Dal, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.39, No.14/15, (Apr. 3-16), p. 1515.

<sup>5</sup> Ajit Singh (2005): *Shiromani Akali Dal Religio-Political Study (1947-90)*, Kaputhala- India: Armaan Publications, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> Dalip Singh (1981): *Dynamics of Punjab Politics*, New Delhi: Macmillan India, p.346.

demands. That era of Panth politics was followed by the demand of Sikh homeland to fulfil the demands of Anandpur Sahib Resolution.

## 2.1 Anandpur Sahib Resolution

The demand for Sikh homeland found expression in the form of Akali movement of Punjab. Slogans like ‘*Raj Karega Khalsa*’ or ‘*Khalsa ka Bolbala*’ were raised.<sup>8</sup> In 1973 the working committee of the Akali Dal passed a detailed resolution in a meeting held at Anandpur Sahib. It became the basis of policies and programmes of the party. The objectives of Anandpur Sahib Resolution were as follows:

- Transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab
- Inclusion of Punjabi speaking areas into Punjab
- Demand for autonomy to all states of India with the centre retaining limited jurisdiction only over external affairs, defence and communication.
- Introduction of land reform and subsidies for peasantry as well as measures to bring about heavy industrialization in Punjab.
- Enactment of all India Gurdwara act to bring all the historic Gurdwaras under the control of SGPC.
- Protection of Sikh minorities living outside the state.
- Repeal of the new recruitment policy of centre under which recruitment quota of Sikhs in armed forces fell from 20% to 2%.<sup>9</sup>

In 1981 two new demands were added to the resolutions:

- To halt the reallocation of available water of river of riparian Punjab to other non-riparian states of Haryana, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh and a further reduction in government control over hydroelectric installation.
- The reorganization of Sikh personal law.<sup>10</sup>

It demanded complete re-structuring of centre-state relations in terms of its Anandpur Sahib Resolution and acceptance of some important religious demands of the Sikh community. It also demanded a personal law and a special status for Sikhs and wanted major change in the Indian Federal System for attaining greater unity. One section of Akali Dal has gone further and demanded a creation of Khalistan that is separate Sikh State which completely isolated the party from the national mainstream. With the growth of militancy in

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<sup>8</sup> Ashutosh Kumar (2004): Electoral Politics in Punjab: Study of Akali Dal, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.39, No.14/15, (Apr. 3-16), p. 1515.

<sup>9</sup> Ajit Singh (2005): *Shiromani Akali Dal Religio-Political Study (1947-90)*, Kaputhala- India: Armaan Publications, pp.111-125.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

Punjab it became irrelevant in this changed context of militancy era in Punjab. Militancy was curbed with operation Bluestar and operation Woodrose. For a long time, the demands contained in the Anandpur Sahib Resolution caused conflict. They launched Dharm Yudh Morcha in 1982. We note that after the outbreak of militancy in the state, there has been a consolidation of Sikh votes in favour of Panthic (Sikh) organisation.

### **3. Peace Agenda**

The second agenda of the SAD is the peace agenda. Akali Dal, which initially, had started as a party of Sikh Panth which retains its Panthic agenda but over the years and especially after the Moga declaration in 1996, the party became the party for all the Punjabis: allowing Hindus to join the party and also to fight elections on party ticket. Thus it succeeded in broadening its base from a Sikh party to a state/regional party which no longer has a confrontational attitude against the centre. To broaden its base further, it entered into a long-term alliance with the BJP. In short its agenda has changed over a period of time. Now it claims to represent '*Punjab, Punjabi and Punjabiat*' rather than being a Sikh religious party. The shift in terms of party's electoral strategy has come due to the realisation that the party cannot come to power on its own and in order to be 'coalition able', the party needs to soften its position on the contentious issues. The long-term alliance between the BJP and the SAD which is based on electoral pragmatism has emanated from this understanding. There is also a realization on the part of the Akali leadership about the critical dependence of the state over central assistance.

Important political developments like the revival of mainstream Akali Dal politics and its success in forging inter- community alliance with *Hindutva* oriented Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and first Akali Dal-BJP coalition government completing its full term in office despite suffering vertical split within its ranks, broke the myth that the party ridden with factionalism could not govern but only agitate. The revival of the mainstream SAD politics and its emphasis on inter-community peace and reconciliation were welcome developments. The alliance with the BJP further helped SAD in broadening its social support in the last two assembly elections. By giving tickets to Hindus and contesting in the urban constituency and emphasising on urban development the SAD had shown that it wants to be viewed as a broad-based / catch-all party so that it need not be dependent on the BJP for the formation of government in the state. It does not want to be viewed any longer only as a Jat Sikh/rural social support based party though it has so far retained its core support base also. This can be

further illustrated by the fact that earlier in order to become a member of the SAD organisation the members had to get baptised, which highlighted the centrality of *Khalsa* identity as the true Sikh within the panth, but this ritual is no more performed at present. It was the same electoral compulsion to keep its Sikh voters within its camp that the President of the party Sukhbir Singh Badal had to get himself Baptised (*amritpan*).

#### **4. Development and Good Governance Agenda**

The third agenda of development and good governance of the SAD became prominent when normalcy returned to Punjab in the early 90's and SAD proclaimed itself as a secular party. Development, then, became the sole concern of the party. Not only SAD but other parties also tried to regionalize their agenda to provide good governance in the state. Development and good governance agenda has been the leading one in state politics since 1997 onwards. 1997 elections proved to be a watershed election in Punjab after militancy. In 1992, assembly elections were boycotted by all the Akali Dal factions except a splinter Akali Dal faction (Kabul) under the leadership of Amrinder Singh. Only Congress contested the elections. But the call of boycott of elections by the militants led to a decline in voter's turn out in the assembly elections. Due to these reasons, the 1997 elections are considered as the first elections that can be termed as 'normal' elections after the end of militancy. Furthermore, from 1997 elections to 2012 elections, there has been a prominent change in the political agenda of parties in Punjab, which is generally explained as a shift from identity based politics to development centred politics. The electoral agenda in this period has shifted from ethnic issues to the agenda for peace and Hindu-Sikh unity. This election also marked the beginning of Akali-BJP long-term alliance. Over the years, SAD under the firm control of Badal has made another shift in the electoral agenda of the party. The SAD now not only declared itself as a party that stood for development and governance and not simply for Panthic issues. Assembly elections since 2002 till 2012 have been fought mainly on the issues of development and governance in Punjab. SAD has been credited for bringing this shift and so far as other parties are concerned they have followed the SAD (Jodhka 2000; Kumar 2004).

There has been a long lasting coalition between a state level party i.e. Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and a national party i.e. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The recent success of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has opened new possibility in the state. The party manifesto's of the Akali Dal shows that there has been a shift from Panthic agenda to development agenda in

the state. Political-economic issues are replacing ethno-religious issues. The victory of the AAP further has consolidated this trend. From a long time, Punjab has witnessed ‘regular oscillation’ in form of ruling party being voted out in each election and replaced by leading opposition party. The 14<sup>th</sup> assembly elections of state held in 2012, however, witnessed that ruling Shiromani Akali Dal-BJP alliance bucked the anti-incumbency trend in Punjab. Even in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the SAD-BJP alliance increased its seats despite facing local anti incumbency situation. It was stated by Kumar and Sekhon that the results of 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections signalled the rise of a third alternative.<sup>11</sup>

### **5. Shift in Agenda from Panthic to Development and Good Governance: Interpreting the Party Manifestos**

The 1997 manifesto of SAD was named ‘SAD-BJP Common Minimum Programme-1997’. The title and the agenda of manifesto suggested that political parties in Punjab now wanted to establish communal peace and cooperation with each other. The development agenda of party provided shape to the SAD ideology from 1997 onwards. This alliance promised to serve peace, unity, belongingness of brotherhood and religious unity. No one was to be given permission or allowed to spoil law and peace in the state. SAD claimed that they have developed and made Punjab a peaceful area after a long struggle and it’s their commitment (*pavitar vachan*) to serve these interests. Their manifesto is not only a manifesto but a pure commitment with Punjabis.”<sup>12</sup>

SAD’s Election manifesto of 2002 contained the issue of ‘New Agenda And Promises’, where they tried to attract the voters in the name of Panth, Punjab, and Punjabi at one side and the populist policies on the other side under the theme ‘what we promised, we fulfilled it and what we are promising, we will do that’<sup>13</sup> (*jo keha, oh kar vikhya , jo kehnde ha oh kar vikhavage*).

In the 2007 assembly election SAD attempted to woo the voters with a very catchy idea of ‘Committed to Service and Better Tomorrow’ (*Raj Nahi, Seva*). This was contained in its manifesto. This manifesto also had the same populist agenda to mobilize the voters from every section of society with a promise to provide them with basic facilities and food at subsidised rates (e.g. dal for Rs. 4 a kilo and flour for Rs 20 a kg for the weaker sections of

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<sup>11</sup> Jagrup Singh Sekhon and Ashutosh Kumar (2014): ‘The Real Star in Punjab is Aam Adami Party’, *The Hindu*, May 25, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Common minimum programme of SAD 1997

<sup>13</sup> Shiromani Akalai Dal choan Manorth Pattar- Punjab Vidhan Sabha Elections- 2002

the society). It was for the very first time the SAD published its manifesto in Punjabi and English, to catch the attention of all sections of the society. In this manifesto they took up urban and industrial issues in details and proposed populist policies for the poorer sections. It stated that the party is committed to serve humankind on the lines set by great gurus *Sarbat Da Bhala*.

In the 2012 manifesto SAD promised to make immense changes. They named it 'Development for All' which talked about communal harmony and about religion in a silent tone. The manifesto was for populist policies and to deliver patronage to everyone, but it was full with the issues of development in all sectors like in education, health, agriculture, infrastructure and urban development. It was for the first time SAD directly tried to attract or mobilize the urban voters on the name of urban development and development of infrastructure.

## **6. Summing Up: Agenda for Development and Good Governance**

From the above discussions we note that since 1997 development centred agenda has provided shape to SAD ideology in the assembly elections. But religion has remained the primary concern of the party. It is an integral part of SAD ideology though it has remained silent. Party keeps moulding its ideology in the changed context. '*Sarbat Da Bhala*'-development for all has been the party's agenda. In this manner there has been a shift in the focus from ethno-religious issues to political-economic issues. There has been a decline of identity politics and growth in developmental agenda. There is no deep insistence on Panthic agenda. Moderate and secular politics under the leadership of Prakash Singh Badal has come into existence. Party manifesto's after 1997 election reflects that SAD wanted to develop peaceful relationship with the Hindus. Within the SAD's development strategy from 1997 onwards, economic issues have been accorded top priority like development of infrastructure, rights of water etc. To increase their share of vote the party has largely used populist measures for the poor in the state.

The party which was founded in 1920 with special motives of religious and social reforms and which is always accused of being religious, regional, and at times even communal by its detractors is now trying to underline its ideology under the changed situation. The talk about adherence to Guru Nanak Dev's principles of "*sarbat da bhala*" (welfare of all) and "*manas ki jaat sabhey ek hai pehchan bo*" (universality and equality of mankind). Since the 1997 assembly elections, SAD has been asking for votes in the name of

peace, harmony, and development. After going through the literature it's clearly visible that in the changed context the party has made conscious shift in order to become acceptable as a mainstream party and also get rid of the radical elements which was responsible for militancy in the 80's. The shift also has emerged due to the realisation that the party cannot come to power on its own and in order to be 'coalition able', the party needs to soften its position on the contentious issues. The long term alliance between the BJP and the SAD which is based on electoral pragmatism has emanated from it. The leadership of Prakash Singh Badal who has always been a moderate leader and in favour of ethnic peace and reconciliation has also influenced the shift in the party's stand. The federalisation of polity has empowered the states in India to a considerable degree, hence the demands for regional autonomy and holding anti-centre sentiments have receded. This is also the case with the SAD. Party has moulded its ideology and is trying to garner votes in the name of development is also due to the realisation by the party leaders that the post-Bluestar generation that constitute the majority of the Punjab electorates, has no inclination to go back to the days of militancy. With Punjab economy going down as the Green Revolution has run its course, the electorates' as well as the party's youthful leadership's prime concern is to get back Punjab on the path of development. SAD has been trying to broaden its social support base by inducting Hindus and even giving tickets to them in the last two assembly elections. The party wants to become broad-based /catch-all so that it need not depend on the BJP for the formation of government. It does not want to be viewed only as a Jat Sikh/rural based party though it has so far retained this core support base.

As the available party literature shows, there has been a shift from Panthic agenda to development agenda in the state. Political-economic issues are replacing ethno-religious issues. The victory of AAP in 4 Lok Sabha seats in 2014 elections was another testimony of the demise of Panthic agenda in the state and the consolidation of the 'peace agenda'/'development/good governance agenda'. This changed agenda had favoured the AAP to register its victory in the state. During the election the burning issues were drug problem, unemployment, corruption, power of sand mafia etc. AAP raised its voice against these issues. Drug was the major issue which was raised by AAP with full intensity. It was followed by the victory of the Congress party in state.

So the question which arises is will the development agenda which was initiated by the Akali party will lead to change the fate of party in future elections in the state?

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