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Class, nation and religion: changing nature of Akali Dal politics in Punjab, India

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The Akali Dal is the best organised political party in Punjab and has ruled over Punjab for a longer period than any other political party since the creation of the Punjabi-speaking state in 1966. It articulates aspirations of Punjabi regional nationalism along with trying to protect the interests of the Sikhs as a religious minority in India and abroad. As a part of shaping Punjab’s economic future, it deals with the pressures of Indian and global capitalism. This paper is an attempt to track the multi-faceted pressures of class, religion and nationalism in the way Akali Dal negotiates its politics in Indian federalism.

Keywords: Akali politics; Anandpur Sahib Resolution; communalism; Hindu nationalism; federalism; Indian nationalism; Khalistan; Operation Bluestar; Punjab Assembly elections; Punjabi nationalism; Punjabiyat; rural bourgeoisie; Sikh nationalism

Introduction

The Shiromani Akali Dal (Akali Dal henceforth) is the best organised and the second oldest (next only to Congress) political party in Punjab, and the oldest regional party in India. It is the only regional party in Punjab and, in that position, views various politico-economic issues from the perspective of their impact and implications for Punjab. It is also the only political party in India that claims to protect the interests of the Sikh minority living in the other states of India and in other countries.

A comprehensive understanding of Akali Dal politics requires capturing these four aspects together regarding Akali Dal: the best organised political party in Punjab, the oldest regional political party in India, the only regional political party in Punjab and the only party that claims to protect the interests, especially religious, of the Sikhs all over the world. Let us briefly expand on these four aspects. Regarding organisation, the other four party groupings in

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Punjab are: the Indian National Congress (henceforth Congress), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Left parties (CPI/CPM/CPIML) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The BJP is confined to a few Hindu-majority urban areas, the Left parties are confined to a few pockets that have had communist activity in the past and the BSP is confined mainly to a few areas that have some concentration of so-called low-caste sections of the population. The only political party that comes somewhere near Akali Dal in terms of influence all over Punjab is Congress but even Congress’ all Punjab reach in political influence, which was more than the Akali Dal’s in the 1960s, is not matched by the comparable organisational strength of Akali Dal. The Congress is not a cadre-based party as the Akali Dal is and its influence and organisational strength have been on the decline in comparison with the rising influence and organisational strength of Akali Dal. Regarding Akali Dal being the oldest regional political party in India, the important point to highlight is that unlike Akali Dal with its autonomous origins, many of the regional parties are offshoots of the Congress Party after India’s independence and even those who have autonomous origins are not as old as Akali Dal. Compared to Akali Dal’s birth in 1920, the other regional parties with autonomous origins are: Jammu & Kashmir National Conference (1932), Kerala’s Indian Union Muslim League (1948) and the Tamil Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (1949).  

The fact that it is the best organised party in Punjab highlights the need for explaining the reasons for acquiring that status and for exploring the significance of this for relative strength of the regional Akali party and the so-called national parties in Punjab. Its status as the oldest regional party in India highlights both the strong roots of region-based nationalism in Punjab as well as the structural dimensions of the Sikh location in Punjab and India. The critical importance of these aspects in the politics of Akali Dal points to the weakness of analytical frameworks that attempt to generalise about regional parties in India and place Akali Dal as just another regional party in an analytical framework theorising regionalism in India. This does not mean, however, that general conceptual categories of class, caste, nation, religion, region and gender cannot be applied to studying Punjab politics and the place of Akali Dal in that politics. What I am emphasising is that the specificities of each regional formation should not be downgraded to fit a generalised framework about regionalism. This paper is an attempt to employ the conceptual categories of class, nation and religion in understanding the nature of Akali politics in Punjab and India. This paper has not taken into account the aspect of caste and gender in Akali politics. Undoubtedly, the incorporation of caste and gender into the analysis would enrich our understanding of Akali politics but I have focused on engaging with three characterisations of Akali Dal that are dominant in the literature and which take class, nation and religion as the defining criterion to characterise Akali Dal.
A dominant tendency in characterising Akali Dal by using the category of class is to characterise Akali Dal as a party of rich agrarian bourgeoisie. Purewal (2000) could be considered as representing this characterisation of Akali Dal.

The characterisation of Akali Dal that has nation and region as the central categories of characterisation is based on a framework of differentiating Indian political parties into two baskets of ‘national’ and ‘regional’, and then putting Akali Dal into the regional basket along with all other regional parties. The source of theoretical inspiration for this characterisation of Akali Dal comes from work on regional parties such as that of Yadav and Palshikar (2009). The third characterisation of Akali Dal that assigns a key importance to religion follows primarily from the work of historian Bipan Chandra and characterises Akali Dal as the party of Sikh communalism (Chandra 1987). We discuss below the key phases in the historical evolution of Akali Dal since its birth in 1920 and then critically evaluate the three characterisations mentioned above in the light of the historical evolution of Akali Dal.

**Early phase (1920–1947): coping with disadvantages of a minority status**

Akali Dal owes its birth as a political organisation to the Sikh movement for control over its religious institutions during the British colonial rule in India (Grewal, 1996, 1998; M. Singh, 1978, 1988; Narang, 1983). Before the British annexation of Punjab in 1849 and the eventual merger of Punjab with the rest of colonially occupied India, Punjab existed as a sovereign state for 50 years under the rule of a Sikh emperor Ranjit Singh (Fisher, 1999; K. Singh, 1997; Singh & Rai, 2009). During the pre-Ranjit Singh era, the eighteenth century witnessed a long and bloody period of armed conflict between the Moghul rulers and the Sikh rebels. The control of many important religious shrines of the Sikh community, the most important being the birth place of Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of the Sikh faith, had during this period passed on into the hands of a pacifist sect (called Udasi) amongst the Sikh community. This pacifist sect’s control of Gurdwaras, the Sikh religious places, suited both the Moghul rulers as well as the Sikh guerrilla bands. The Moghul rulers by accepting or even supporting the pacifist Sikhs’ control of the Gurdwaras wanted to discourage the rebellious tendency amongst the Sikhs while the guerrilla Sikh fighters knew that they could not logistically manage to run the gurdwaras while involved in armed combat against the rulers and tacitly agreed to let the pacifist sect keep managing the gurdwaras. The Sikh community was also respectful to the sect since its founder Sri Chand was one of the sons of Guru Nanak (S. Singh, 1983). Therefore, the control of gurdwaras by the sect was allowed to continue even during the Ranjit Singh era (1799–1849) (S. Singh, 1980).
The agreement of the mainstream Sikh community to the sect’s management of gurdwaras came to an end when it became widely known in the early twentieth century that the management indulged in financial and religious malpractices (Kapur, 1986). A movement to replace that management by democratically elected representatives of the Sikh community achieved success and the volunteers who participated in the movement were called Akali (a worshipper of the Eternal God) (Fox, 1987; Kerr 1988). Bringing together all the Akali volunteers under one umbrella organisation resulted in the founding of Shiromani Akali Dal in December 1920. The major achievement of the Akali movement was the creation of a central management committee (SGPC i.e. Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandhak Committee) to look after the gurdwaras (Kapur, 1986). The election to this committee was to involve the entire Sikh community leading to this committee being called the mini-parliament of the Sikhs. This historical association of Akali Dal with the founding of this committee has had a long-term impact on the public image and perception of Akali Dal as an organisation primarily concerned with politics of religious issues concerning the Sikhs. This perception is certainly historically grounded but it also acts as a barrier in building views of Akali politics that transcend this religious focus.

If in the early 1920s, the major focus of Akali activity remained with the issues concerning governance of Sikh gurdwaras, by the late 1920s and the 1930s, the shift was taking place towards politics aimed at protecting the collective interests of the Sikhs as a community. With the Sikhs constituting only 13 per cent share in colonial Punjab’s population, the Akali Dal from its very inception was acutely aware of this minority status of the Sikh community and, therefore, of the vulnerability of the Sikhs to being marginalised in the political governance of Punjab (P. Singh, 2008). The emerging possibility of India being divided after the end of British Rule into a Hindu-majority Hindustan and a Muslim-majority Pakistan presented the Akali Dal with very tough scenarios regarding the political future of the Sikh community (Ahmed, 2012; Yong, 1994). With no possibility of carving out a Sikh-majority state due to demographic, geographical and political constraints, the Akali leadership could hardly manage to do anything more than seek vague promises from the Indian nationalist leadership to protect Sikhs in the Hindu-majority India.

It is clear that during this phase, the main concern of the Sikh leaders and masses was to avoid suffering the disadvantage of being a minority. Religious identity was the dominant aspect, although the class interests of the landed upper classes did play their role in designing various responses to proposals for political governance. Punjab also witnessed the emergence of a strong regional party – the Unionist Party – that comprised the landed elites of the three main religious communities of Punjab-Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs (Talbot 1988, 1994; Tiwana 1999). Akali Dal kept out of this regional grouping
although some individual Sikh leaders associated with this regional grouping came into the fold of Akali Dal.


In the post-colonial Indian Punjab, the in-migration of Sikhs from Pakistan/West Punjab and the out-migration of Muslims from India/East Punjab led to the emergence of Sikhs, for the first time in their history, as a majority community in some central districts of Punjab, although taking Punjab as a whole, the Sikhs were still a minority. In 1951, the Sikhs were 35 per cent of the total population of the state (Brass, 1974, p. 301). Linguistically, Punjab was still a multi-lingual state because many districts that now form Haryana or are in Himachal Pradesh were not Punjabi-speaking areas.

The Akali Dal launched a movement for the creation of a Punjabi-speaking state (called Punjabi Suba) that started in 1955 and reached its height in 1960–1961 (Sarhadi, 1970). Soon after India’s independence, the Indian State was faced with similar demands in other parts of India for the reorganisation of states on linguistic grounds. Nehru, Patel and the other leaders of the ruling Congress Party were acutely aware of the partition of India in 1947 on religious grounds. They were, therefore, very suspiscions of any identity which they thought could undermine their goal of forming a unified Indian identity. It is this mind-set and Indian nationalist vision which led them to initially oppose any demand for the creation of linguistic states. However, with the passage of time, the central leadership gave in to the demands for the creation of some new states, e.g. Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh. The central leadership could reconcile to the creation of these new states because they were not seen as threats to the territorial integrity of India.

The central leadership, however, viewed the demand for the creation of Punjabi Suba (Punjabi-speaking state) out of the existing multi-lingual state in a sharply different way. It not only rejected this demand, it suppressed the movement for Punjabi Suba by resorting to very repressive measures. The rejection of the demand for the creation of Punjabi Suba was due to two main reasons: Punjab was a border state between India and Pakistan, and the creation of a Punjabi-speaking state would have led to the creation of a territorial space with a Sikh majority. However, the death of Nehru, the most vocal opponent of Punjabi Suba (Gill, 1998, 1999), in 1964 and the rise to power of Lal Bahadur Shastri as prime minister of India created a new political environment that was conducive to the creation of Punjabi Suba. The rise of Sant Fateh Singh to eminence in Akali politics further facilitated the creation of this conducive environment because he emphasised the linguistic aspect
of the demand. Eventually, Punjab was partitioned between a Punjabi-speaking state and Haryana in 1966 (P. Singh, 2008).

During this phase, Akali Dal articulated mixed aspirations of the Sikh community over questions concerning language, religion and nationalism in which the language aspect seemed to be dominant although tinged with various shades of religion. One very interesting aspect of Akali politics during this phase is that the Akalis viewed themselves primarily as active agents engaged in defensive action to protect the linguistic and cultural and, through that, the national interests of the Sikh community. Akali Dal did not visualise itself, during this phase, as a claimant to power in Punjab and confined itself to a merely oppositionist role. It participated in all the legislative assembly elections in Punjab from the very beginning but being very clear about always performing an opposition role. This political outlook was to undergo drastic change after the formation of Punjabi Suba when the Akali Dal saw itself as a natural claimant to power.

The mixture of religion and language has been so complex in Punjab that advancing the cause of Punjabi language by Akali Dal has been viewed by some ‘secular’ critics of Akali Dal (Chandra, 1987) as a disguised Sikh and, therefore, communal demand. This ‘secular’ charge against Akali Dal acquired some weight when even some Akali leaders themselves visualised the furtherance of Punjabi language as a Sikh issue (Sarhadi, 1970). However, the support extended by the Communist Party and some left-wing intellectuals to the demand for a Punjabi-speaking state in the last phase of the agitation for the state, and the clear enunciation by the Akali leader Sant Fateh Singh that their demand was for a Punjabi-speaking state irrespective of the percentage of population constituted by different religious communities in that state, did introduce some correctives to the communalisation of Punjabi language. This also contributed to Akali Dal being seen as a mixed champion of Sikh nationalism and Punjabi nationalism (P. Singh, 2008).

Seeking political power (1966–1975): frustrated ambitions and rising nationalist aspirations

With the creation of a Punjabi-speaking state in November 1966, there emerged a compact territorial space where the Sikhs were a majority. The 1971 census showed that Sikhs were 60.22 per cent of the total population of Punjab (Census of India data, cited by Robinson, 1987, p. 313). This raised the ambitions of Akali leadership to capture power in the new state, and the first assembly elections in the new state in 1967 led to the realisation of this ambition when a first non-Congress government led by the Akalis came to power (Deol, 1986; D. Singh, 1981). However, the Congress Party’s success in engineering defections in Akali ranks and bringing down the government in August 1968 deflated Akali ambitions. The success of the Akalis in coming back to
power in 1969 rekindled those ambitions which were again frustrated when the government was brought down through dissolving of the state assembly by the Governor in June 1971 (Government of India, 1988, p. 185). This cycle of rising and deflating ambitions led the Akali Dal to rethink their long-term strategy to deal with a governance structure in India where the Centre had hugely enormous powers. The Anandpur Sahib Resolution (ASR) seeking greater autonomy for states in India’s federal structure was a product of this long-term thinking. Akali Dal viewed itself as articulating the mixed aspirations of Sikh nationalism for power and that of Punjabi nationalism for regional autonomy within India’s centralised structure of governance. The possibility of tensions between Sikh nationalist perspective and regional Punjabi nationalist perspective was not explored by simply assuming that what was good for Punjab was good for the Sikhs and vice versa. The ambiguity in Akali perspective over this commonality vs. tension between Sikh nationalism and Punjabi nationalism persists.


The Akali Dal’s vigorous role in opposing Indira Gandhi’s Emergency rule in 1975 is a very fascinating subject that remains largely unresearched. The Akali Dal was the only political party that in an organised fashion launched a movement of resistance to oppose the Emergency. Indira Gandhi, alarmed by Akali success in organising volunteers to court arrests every day, offered an accommodation to Akali leadership that if they allowed her to rule at the Centre, she would agree to them ruling Punjab in a similar fashion as the DMK was ruling Tamil Nadu. Two independent accounts have confirmed that this offer was made by Mrs Gandhi to the Akalis. Mr Tarlochan Singh, a former Chairman of India’s National Commission for Minorities and currently a member of India’s Rajya Sabha (Upper House), in an interview with me on 5 April 2013 in Delhi, told me that he had arranged a meeting of Giani Zail Singh, the then Chief Minister of Punjab, and Parkash Singh Badal in Amritsar Circuit House in 1975 to place Mrs Gandhi’s offer to Badal and Akali Dal. He said that though Badal was reluctant to meet but due to Badal’s trust in him, he agreed to go ahead with the meeting. Badal did not commit to anything at the meeting and said that he would put forward the proposal to the top leadership of the party. The party leadership rejected the offer. Another very senior civil servant, now retired, also confided in me in Delhi in April 2013 that he was instrumental in arranging a meeting between Badal and Zail Singh, and that the Akalis refused to accept the offer. Akali Dal could have accepted this easy route to almost permanent power in Punjab by agreeing to the Gandhi offer but it did not.
This Akali rejection of an accommodation with the Congress, especially under the circumstances of the Emergency rule, deserves some explanation to understand the deeper underlying currents that shape the Akali politics. Mr Tarlochan Singh offered one explanation of Akali rejection of Mrs Gandhi’s offer. His view was that the Akalis were scared of their mass base being hostile to accepting an accommodation with the Congress. This seemingly pragmatic explanation also suggests that there were deeper undercurrents in Sikh society against authoritarianism that compelled the Akali leaders not to succumb to power sharing with the Congress even if they might have been personally tempted to. My view is that Akali Dal did not accept accommodation for two reasons. One, a long-held belief that to be a Sikh is to fight against authoritarian rulers/oppression posed an almost paradigm barrier to accepting accommodation with Gandhi (see H. Singh, 1994 on Sikh heritage). Second, the Akalis seem to have an unarticulated belief in the value of democracy from the viewpoint of a minority. This belief was based on the realisation that a religious minority is likely to be more unsafe and insecure in an authoritarian situation than in a democratic framework. Democracy was seen as a system of checks and balances, however flawed, against excessive misuse by a ruler from a majority community. It is worth mentioning here that the well-known leaders of the anti-Emergency movement in India (particularly Jaya Prakash Narayan, George Fernandes and Chandra Sekhar) were highly appreciative of the leading role Akali Dal had played in mobilising mass opposition in Punjab against the Emergency and all of them remained life-long sympathisers of the Akali Dal due to this.

We notice that in this phase the view was that to protect Sikhs as a minority in a Hindu-majority country from a long-term point of view required protection of democracy and democratic institutions. The impulse was protection of religious and cultural rights of Sikhs but the articulation of that impulse was as a struggle against undemocratic rule.


The Akali Dal came back to power in 1977 at the end of Emergency but the return of an Indira Gandhi-led Congress to power at the Centre in 1980 led to the dismissal of the Akali-led government. In opposition, the Akali Dal organised a movement in 1981 for Punjab’s economic rights especially concerning river waters (Mali, 1989). This was the clearest demonstration of the Punjabi nationalist dimension in Akali Dal politics. The scope of that movement expanded to include political and religious demands but the most significant was the demand for implementation of the ASR asking for devolution of powers (A. Singh, 1992b; Jeffrey, 1994; P. Singh, 2008). Along with the
Akali-led peaceful movement there emerged an extremist tendency in Sikh politics that had roots in religious revivalism (Mukherji, 1984, 1985; P. Singh, 1987). Both the Akali and Sikh extremist tendencies competed against and, in some instances, complemented each other. The Akali-led movement was a massive success in terms of mass mobilisation (P. Singh, 1982) but its failure to get Punjab’s demands accepted by the Centre (Bhambri, 1985) led to strengthening the extremist Sikh tendency. This eventually resulted in a bloody confrontation in 1984 between the Indian army and the armed Sikh militants hiding in the building complex in and around the Golden Temple, the holiest Sikh shrine (Brar, 1993; Govt of India, 1984; Kaur, 1990; Nayar & Singh, 1984; Tully & Jacob, 1985). This confrontation, known as Operation Blue Star, represented in its most tragic and violent form the clash between the perspectives of Punjabi/Sikh nationalism and Indian/Hindu nationalism (P. Singh, 2008, 2009). The events following Operation Blue Star opened up all the fault lines in the Indian/Hindu nationalism’s relationship with Punjabi/Sikh nationalism. It may be useful to elaborate briefly the hyphenated term Indian/Hindu nationalism used here. Indian nationalism even when claims are made to its secular character is heavily tinged by Hindu nationalism. Even more importantly in the present context, both the secular/semi-secular garb and the Hindutva garb of Indian nationalism are opposed to Punjabi and Sikh nationalism because of the feared potentiality of Punjabi and Sikh nationalism undermining unified Indian nationalism whether in secular or in Hindutva garb.

**Confronting central authoritarianism and militant Sikh nationalism (1984–1997): competing nationalisms**

All the dimensions of Akali Dal politics around nationalism and religion acquired the sharpest focus ever during this phase but the class dimension remained subdued and suppressed. The conflict over religion and nationalism was so sharp and overpowering that the tensions around class interests got hidden and buried.

The Akali Dal also faced being very isolated in Indian politics. One of the features of Akali Dal politics in the post-1966 period has been to seek non-Congress allies at an all India level as leverage against Congress, its main opponent in Punjab. Its attempts have varied between forming alliances with the Left, centre (Janata) and Hindu Right (Jan Sangh/BJP) all together (early United Front period) or with the Left (1980 Assembly elections) or with the BSP/Dalits or with the Hindu Right. Akali Dal had an alliance with the Left, centre (Janata) and Jan Sangh in the first United Front Ministry it formed in 1967. It continued with a similar united front combination between 1969 and 1970 but with a move away from the Left and towards Jan Sangh. It moved
decisively towards alliance with Janata and Jan Sangh between 1970–1971 and 1977–1980. It broke its alliance with the Jan Sangh and formed an alliance with the communist parties (CPI and CPM) for the 1980 Assembly Elections which the alliance narrowly lost. It formed an alliance with the BSP for the 1996 parliamentary elections and the alliance won 11 seats out of 13. It snapped its alliance with the BSP shortly afterwards when the BSP joined hands with Congress in UP. Since 1997, it has been in a consistent, though not without tension, alliance with the BJP for all elections.

Although anti-Congressism has been the driving force behind seeking the best partner at a particular point of time, the internal struggles within Akali Dal suggesting the relative strength of different class factions have also played a role, though a subordinate one, in explaining the shifting alliances. During the 1980 Assembly Elections, there was a clear polarisation between the Badal faction representing the agrarian and industrial bourgeoisie wanting an alliance with the trader-dominated Jan Sangh and the Talwandi-Tohra factions representing the small and middle peasantry wanting an alliance with the Left parties. The Talwandi-Tohra faction at that specific point of time was relatively stronger and the alliance was, therefore, eventually forged with the Left parties. Subsequently, that faction became weaker and the Badal faction faced very little resistance in forging ties with Jan Sangh/later BJP. The pro-Congress tilt of the main Left parties, CPI/CPM, in the 1980s and the weakening of the Left in Punjab since the 1980s also facilitated the shift towards an alliance with the BJP. It is important to emphasise here that though competing class factions may be at play in advancing different alliance strategies, the deciding factor in choosing an electoral partner is the potential contribution of the partner in defeating the Congress party, the main rival of Akali Dal.

In the post-1984 period, Indian nationalism, whether in the semi-secular garb of the Congress or in the Hindutva garb of the BJP, has very decisively shaped the Indian political environment (Bose, 1998; Jaffrelot, 1996; P. Singh, 2005). In this environment, anti-separatist sentiments easily metamorphosed into anti-Akali Dal or even anti-Sikh sentiments. The Akali Dal came to be branded as a supporter, open or disguised, of separatism (P. Singh, 1984). No political party wanted to be branded as a supporter of separatism by associating with it and, therefore, all political parties shunned the Akali Dal. This experience of isolation had a very demoralising impact on the Akali leadership. The fear of being isolated terrified the leadership both from the viewpoint of its implications for Akali Dal as a party as well as for the Sikhs as a small minority in a heavily Hindu-majority country. It is this fear that has had a significant, perhaps even decisive, impact on the Akali Dal making an alliance with a clearly Hindu-oriented party BJP to allay even any lingering suspicion that Akalis or Sikhs harbour any anti-Hindu feelings or sentiments. Akali Dal
believes that the alliance with the BJP has provided a sense of security to the beleaguered Sikh community in the post-1984 period that no other alliance could have provided.  

The emergence of a strong militant Sikh nationalist tendency (more commonly known as Khalistani tendency) in Sikh politics as a reaction against Operation Blue Star and its aftermath created a powerful rival to Akali Dal in Sikh and Punjab politics (A. Singh, 1992a, 2003, 2009; B.P. Singh 1998, 2002; G. Singh 1987, 1992; J. Singh 2006). The Akali Dal had to fight on two fronts simultaneously: one in mainstream Indian and Punjab politics with the purpose of avoiding being isolated and, two, in Punjab/Sikh politics to keep its support base in the Sikh community to avoid being sidelined by the militant separatist tendency. It was a politics of negotiating a path different from Indian nationalism and Sikh nationalism while simultaneously not opposed completely to either of these two competing nationalisms. The politics of Punjabiyyat (Punjabi nationalism) was born out of this necessity to remain relevant in the Indian mainstream while attempting not to totally alienate the Sikh nationalist support base in the Sikh community.

Seeking political domination in Punjab (1997–2013): promoting Punjabiyyat as an inclusive regional identity

With the collapse of the Khalistan movement that was brutally suppressed by the central Indian state (Dhillon, 1998, 2006; Kumar, 1998, 2008; Kumar, Singh, Agrwal, & Kaur, 2003; P. Singh, 2001; Pettigrew, 1995; Sharma, 1996), gradual steps were taken by the Indian state to restart the democratic process of electing the regional Punjab state assembly that had remained suspended for over a decade. A flawed election was held in 1992 which was boycotted by all parties and organisations with electoral base amongst the Sikhs. The Congress government headed by Beant Singh came to power on the basis of a 20 per cent vote and that too from the mainly Hindu-majority urban constituencies (P. Singh, 2008). This government, therefore, lacked any credibility and legitimacy. The first proper democratic election after the long interlude of assembly suspension took place in 1997 and brought the Akali Dal back to power in Punjab (see Appendix). The massive electoral victory secured by Akali Dal reflected the success of Akali strategy of keeping the Sikh support base alive by occasional attacks against the Centre while expanding its base beyond its agrarian landowning classes and castes which had historically been its core social and political base. This attempt to expand its electoral base beyond its core support base was made by articulating an inclusive Punjabi nationalist perspective. This included attempts to appeal to lower castes amongst the Hindus, Sikhs and the small Christian community through social welfare measures, and to win over the rich Hindu bourgeoisie.
by offering to accommodate individuals from these strata by giving them posts of economic and political influence. The Akali Dal has persisted with this strategy, being returned to power in the 2007 and 2012 state assembly elections (Appendix, also see Kumar, 2007, 2012a, 2012b, M. Singh, 2012). There is certainly no doubt that the Akali Dal has become organisationally more representative of different segments of Punjabi society than it has ever been before. By giving greater prominence to the ‘development’ agenda than it has done before, it has sought to signal that its programme and politics are more inclusive than before.

In its self-perception as a party with a claim to power, the Akali Dal has made a huge transition. In the pre-1966 post-colonial Punjab, when the Sikhs were about 35 per cent of the multi-lingual Punjab’s population (Brass, 1974, p. 301), the Akali Dal never visualised itself as a ruling party – its entire programme and politics were guided by its perception that it could only perform an oppositionist role, and its success as an organisation was viewed from the angle of how powerful and effective its opposition had been. In the post-1966 Punjab (with a nearly 60 per cent Sikh share in the population), Akali self-consciousness was of a party rightfully claiming to rule Punjab but only through alliances with other non-Congress parties. This self-consciousness was given a rude shock when successive Akali-led governments were dismissed by the Congress-led Centre (P. Singh, 2008). This paved the way for the framing of the ASR asking for curtailment of central powers. The post-1984 Akali Dal has increasingly come to view itself as a party with a claim to rule just on its own without any alliance. The formation of this view was given a big boost by the unprecedented victory of Akali Dal in the 1985 assembly elections when it won an absolute majority on its own (Appendix). The subsequent victories have cemented this self-perception, although it maintains an alliance with BJP with a view to have an all India party as an ally at the Centre (Kumar, 2007, 2012b; Kumar & Kumar, 2002).

The retired civil servant I have referred to above was of the view that Akalis had entered a power-sharing arrangement with the BJP that is similar to what was offered to them by Mrs Gandhi during the Emergency except that there was one big difference. In Akali power sharing with the BJP in Punjab, the Akali Dal will be always a bigger party in the arrangement due to BJP’s limited electoral base in a few Hindu-majority urban constituencies. This could not have been ensured with a power-sharing arrangement with a much bigger Congress party. In the course of its history in the post-1947 period, Akali Dal has come a long way from being an opposition party to a position of self-confidence as the natural ruling party in Punjab.

Although it remains wary of Congress-machinations at the Centre, it does not suffer any more from the fear of being arbitrarily dismissed by the Centre because the continued rule of the Congress at the Centre can no longer be
assumed as it could be before the Emergency era in Indian politics. The change in the macro political environment in India with the emergence of coalition politics at the Centre where the regional parties have become key players has also made it difficult for any party ruling at the Centre to use arbitrarily article 356 of the Constitution to dismiss a state government (Chiriyankandath, 1997). This reassuring self-confidence is the main reason that Akali Dal no longer harks back to ASR although that resolution still remains the only document the party has produced through sustained inner party deliberations over a considerable period of time. The party may be forced to engage in a similar exercise to develop a long-term perspective that transcends some limitations of the resolution that has terminology suggesting a narrow Sikh-centred mode of thinking (P. Singh, 2013). The core of the resolution relating to demands for federal restructuring of India is robust but needs to be reframed in view of the changed new emphasis on Punjabi identity (see P. Singh 2010a, 2012a, 2012b, in press; Singh & Dhanda, 2014; Singh & Thandi, 1999). The Akali Dal being the only regional party in Punjab is bound to remain for a considerable period of time in the near future as the central driving force in shaping the contours of Punjab politics.

The 1997–2013 phase in Akali Dal’s political history coincides with the launch of the neo-liberal economic policy regime by the Centre in 1991. In its modes of dealing with the pressures of globalisation associated with the neo-liberal policy regime, Akali Dal has defied simplistic characterisations of itself as either pro-neoliberal or anti-neoliberal. On one hand, it does appear to be a votary of neo-liberal economic paradigm in its support for privatisation initiatives in health, education, energy and infrastructural projects, and for entry of foreign direct investment but, on the other, it has disobeyed World Bank advice (World Bank, 2004) by continuing with its policy of providing subsidy supports of varying kinds to farmers and other low-income families.

Conclusions

Between the themes of class, nation and religion, the emphasis in Akali politics has been changing although this change has not been linear or unidirectional. Different moments of Punjab and Sikh history in the last 90 years have seen different aspects of Akali politics become dominant. In the light of the historical and analytical account we have provided of Akali Dal politics, it is clear that any one-dimensional view of Akali Dal is bound to be flawed. Let us look very briefly at three accounts of Akali Dal which are one dimensional in character and which we have touched upon very briefly in the introductory section.

One characterisation of Akali Dal is as a party of rich agrarian bourgeoisie (Purewal, 2000). This characterisation fails to explain Akali Dal government incurring the risk of running a deficit budget to fund social welfare programmes
for the poor rural proletarian population. Through these social welfare programmes, Akali Dal has been defying the World Bank dictates to reduce or even remove subsidies to the poor and curtail the role of state to create space for increased privatisation. Akali Dal has been so clearly committed to this programme that it risked a split by a faction in the party led by Manpreet Singh Badal who had been heading the finance ministry in the Akali government for a number of years and who had been strongly supporting the World Bank argument for reduction/removal of the subsidies.

Another characterisation of Akali Dal to challenge is that Akali Dal is just another regional party much like other regional parties in other states of India (Yadav & Palshikar, 2009). This characterisation fails to capture the important historical fact regarding regional parties in India that many of them, barring a few in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Jammu and Kashmir and in India’s North East, are the products of a faction of the Congress party in a state splitting away to float a new party. The ideological roots of such parties lie in the Congress party. Akali Dal, in contrast, is a party that evolved out of the logic of Sikh history. Akali politics has run parallel to the Congress politics since the beginning of the twentieth century. At times Akali Dal has collaborated with the Congress party but the logic of that collaboration has risen from the internal dynamic of Akali politics and not as a result of sharing the Congress vision. The fact that it is the oldest regional party in India highlights the independent and autonomous character of its evolution in contrast with most other regional parties in India (our mention of Tamil parties highlights the independent character and long history of Tamil nationalism). Undoubtedly, Akali Dal is a regional party and shares some of the features of other regional parties but without understanding the distinctive feature of Akali politics that is rooted in Sikh history, our understanding of Akali politics is bound to remain flawed.

A third characterisation of Akali Dal, following primarily from the work of historian Bipan Chandra, is that it is a party of Sikh communalism (Chandra 1987). Apart from several logical and structural flaws in Chandra’s analysis of communalism that follow from his Indian nationalist perspective, the characterisation of the Akali Dal as a party of Sikh communalism is flawed because of the inability of this characterisation to explain Akali Dal’s consistent demand for inclusion in Punjab of Chandigarh and other Punjabi-speaking areas left in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. If these areas were to be included in Punjab, it would lead to a decline in the Sikh proportion of Punjab’s total population and would potentially weaken Akali Dal’s political base if it were to be merely considered as a Sikh communal party. These demands clearly reflect a Punjabi nationalist dimension in Akali Dal’s mode of thinking and action. Similarly, the Akali Dal’s demands for riparian law-based distribution and allocation of river waters that will protect Punjab’s control of its river water resources, and for the right of Punjab to control its energy resources generated
from the Bhakra dam, represent aspirations and interests of all Punjabis and not only of Sikhs (Dhillon, 1983).

It is a party of Sikh nationalism but not only of Sikh nationalism. It is a party of Punjabi regional nationalism but not only of that. It has aspects that make it appear closer to Sikh nationalism especially when it deals with issues concerning religious rights of the Sikh community, and it has other aspects that make it appear closer to regional Punjabi nationalism when it defends the economic interests of Punjab. It is also a party that goes beyond Punjabi nationalism and seeks to defend and promote the interests of Sikh minorities in the other states of India and abroad. It does protect the interests of agrarian bourgeoisie but also those of the other segments of rural society in Punjab and in doing so, it even sacrifices sometimes the interests of the agrarian bourgeoisie. While responding to the pressures of rural bourgeoisie, it also attempts to include the representation of Punjab’s urban Hindu and Sikh middle classes and bourgeoisie in its organisational structure and policy-making process. Akali Dal seeks hegemony in Punjab politics in a Gramscian sense by pursuing a politics of inclusive accommodation.15

One broad generalisation that can be made is that the changing character of Akali Dal reflects both its responsive mode to external factors such as British rule or Congress/BJP rule at the centre as well as the active role Akali Dal has played as an agency to force other political currents in Punjab and India to respond. Seen in this light, Akali Dal can be seen as an organisation that has responded to external pressures as well as pro-actively sought, as an agent, to change the external environment in which it has to operate.

Acknowledgements

The author is thankful to James Chiriyankandath, Prabhsharandeep Singh, Sumail Sidhu, Shinder Thandi and Andrew Wyatt for their very helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier version of the paper. The usual disclaimer applies.

Notes

1. In the history of Akali Dal, there have been several instances of small splinter groups breaking away from the main Akali Dal and then rejoining the main party later but at each moment, one Akali Dal faction that happens to have the largest mass support becomes the chief representative of the Akali tendency in Punjab politics. Our analysis here takes into account that mainstream Akali Dal. For the last over two decades, Akali Dal led by Parkash Singh Badal, the present Chief Minister of Punjab, is the mainstream Akali Dal and is recognised by the Election Commission of India as Shiromani Akali Dal. Its current President is Sukhbir Singh Badal, the Deputy Chief Minister of Punjab and son of Parkash Singh Badal. The only exception to the tradition of splintering groups rejoining the
mainstream Akali Dal is the Akali Dal (Amritsar) led by Simranjit Singh Mann which has marginal, though constant, support among the Sikhs in India and abroad who support the idea of secession from India through peaceful means. Other Akali Dal factions are named after famous Akali leaders such as Master Tara Singh and Sant Harchand Singh Longowal but they are insignificant in terms of political influence. For more detailed accounts of tendencies/factions in Akali politics, see P. Singh (1982, 1984, 2008) and Narang (2014).

2. The sources of these data are the websites of the regional political parties defined and recognised by the Election Commission of India.


4. Mr Tarlochan Singh was kind enough to accept my request for quoting him. The retired civil servant also agreed to be quoted but wanted to remain anonymous.

5. He put it in Punjabi: *oh lokaan ton darde si* (they i.e. the Akali leaders were scared of people/masses being opposed to accommodation with the Congress). The reference to *lokaan/people* in this context meant the wider Sikh community mainly in Punjab but also beyond Punjab.

6. Both Tarlochan Singh and the retired civil servant I interviewed in Delhi spoke about this. I wish to add a personal experience on this. I was a student at India’s Jawaharlal Nehru University when the Emergency was lifted and I attended one of the biggest rallies in the history of India that took place in Ram Lila grounds in Delhi in 1977 to celebrate the victory of the anti-Emergency movement. The leaders from all shades of the anti-Emergency movement spoke at the rally one by one. When Parkash Singh Badal’s name was announced and he got up to speak, he got the second biggest applause (after JP Narayan) from the audience. I heard people sitting around me in the audience saying that they (Sikhs/Akalis) were brave people in having put up this resistance against the Emergency. It appears that the information had circulated that the Akalis had played the most critical role in mobilising opposition to the Emergency. However, there is little research on the subject and the Akalis themselves have not made much of this.

7. Congress won this election with 63 seats in a house of 117 giving it a very narrow margin of victory. Had the Akali-CPI-CPM alliance won the Punjab Assembly elections in 1980, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the history of Punjab in the last three decades would have been different.

8. The source of these data is a mixed one. I have relied upon Deol (1986, 2000), D. Singh (1981) and supplemented that information with discussions with a number of academics and political activists during a field trip to Delhi and Punjab in April 2013. See Appendix for the Akali share of seats and votes in the elections to the Punjab State Assembly from 1951 to 2012.

9. I first reported the class-based nature of competing factions in Akali Dal in P. Singh (1982).

10. This view was articulated by a senior Akali leader in London in 1997 with a small group of people who were friends of his friends. He said this with a sense of both anger and helplessness when a couple of his friends criticised Akali Dal for forging an alliance with the Hindu nationalist BJP. He said that it was easy for his friends sitting in the comfort of London to criticise Akali Dal for the alliance with BJP but they in India were acutely aware of the small weight they had in the
power structure of India with only a maximum of 13 MPs in a house of 543, and that they do need an ally at the Centre to protect the interests of both Punjab and the Sikhs.

11. As an instance of Akali Dal’s attempt to negotiate a path between Indian nationalism and secessionist Sikh nationalism, I have analysed Akali Dal’s politics of tight-rope dancing on human rights violations in Punjab as a result of the Indian state’s attempt to militarily suppress Sikh nationalism. See P. Singh (2010b).


13. For a good account of regional parties in India with a focus on South India, see Wyatt (2009).


15. For an early attempt at elaboration of my view of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and its application in the Indian context, see Gill (1974). I stopped writing my surname as Gill after this because of the awareness that surnames such as this are used to project caste identity.

References


Appendix. Seats won and percentage of votes polled by Akali Dal in the Punjab State Assembly Elections (1951–2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Seats won 2</th>
<th>Percentage of votes polled 3</th>
<th>Govt. formation 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>13 out of total 126</td>
<td>12.44</td>
<td>Congress govt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957*</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Congress govt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>19 out of 154</td>
<td>11.87</td>
<td>Congress govt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>26 out of 104 (includes 2 won by Master Tara Singh faction)</td>
<td>24.68 (includes 4.20% of Master Tara Singh faction)</td>
<td>Akali-led UF govt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>43 out of 104</td>
<td>29.36</td>
<td>Akali-led UF govt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>24 out of 104</td>
<td>28.52 (includes 0.88% of Gurnam Singh faction which did not win any seat)</td>
<td>Congress govt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>58 out of 117</td>
<td>31.41</td>
<td>Akali-Janata govt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>73 out of 117</td>
<td>38.01</td>
<td>Akali govt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Akali Dal along with Sikh militant groups boycotted the elections</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Congress govt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>75 out of 117 plus Mann Akali Dal wins one seat</td>
<td>37.64 plus Mann Akali Dal polls 3.10% votes</td>
<td>Akali-BJP govt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>41 out of 117</td>
<td>31.08 plus Mann Dal polls 4.65% but does not win any seat</td>
<td>Congress govt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>48 out of 117</td>
<td>37.09 plus Mann Dal polls 0.52% votes without winning any seat</td>
<td>Akali-BJP govt.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Appendix. Continued.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Seats won</th>
<th>Percentage of votes polled</th>
<th>Govt. formation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012*</td>
<td>56 out of 117</td>
<td>34.53 plus Mann Dal polls 0.28% votes without winning any seat</td>
<td>Akali-BJP govt.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: (1) The Akali Dal candidates had contested the 1957 election on Congress ticket under a deal worked out by the Akali leader Giani Kartar Singh but this ‘merger’ fell apart soon after the election due to opposition to it by the top Akali leader Master Tara Singh (Grewal, 1996, pp. 126–127; M. Singh, 1988, p. 164).

2. In 2013, there are 59 Akali MLAs. One Congress MLA (Jain from Moga) resigned from his party and got re-elected in the March 2013 bye-election on Akali Dal ticket. Two Akalis (Bains brothers from Ludhiana) contested as independents in the 2012 election due to a local-level inner-party conflict and rejoined Akali Dal after winning.

Source: Columns 1–3 adapted from data provided by Election Commission of India website (http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/ElectionStatistics.aspx). Column 4 created by the author.