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Punjab politics: Splits and mergers in the Akali Dal

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Abstract

No political party-national or regional is free from the politics of split and merger. It is however in the Akali Dal which is a religion based regional party much more frequent and far more intense than in other parties. In fact, the Akali Dal has been faction-ridden since its creation. The party has often been splitting and different factions have formed separate parties. However, subsequently these factions based parties have been often united into a single party. Thus, the politics of split and merger has been an important feature of the Akali Dal in Punjab. This study helps to understand the Punjab politics in general and politics of Akali Dal in particular.

Keywords: Punjab politics, splits and mergers, Akali Dal

Introduction

India is a democratic country. A democracy cannot exist without political parties. These are the political parties which contest the elections and form the government by winning majority. The parties which cannot able to win the majority play the role as opposition. Minimum two political parties are necessary to run a democracy. But the founding fathers of our constitution adopted the multi-party system for a true democracy in India. There are 8 National level parties and 53 state level parties exist in our country. State level parties are also known as regional parties. Akali Dal is a major regional party in Punjab since its creation. It came into being on December 14, 1920 as the vanguard of the Gurudwara Reform Movement which had been launched to protect the religious interests of the Sikh community. Akali Dal formed its government in Punjab during the 1967, 1969, 1977, 1985, 1997, 2007 and 2012 Assembly elections. But most of the Akali governments were not able to complete their full tenure due to its internal fighting. The politics of split and merger was took place due to this internal fighting in the party. It is an old saying about the Akali Dal, "one Akali a leader, two Akalis are Dal and three Akali are cheos." Another saying about the Akalis is, "Whenever Akalis are out of power, they quarrel with others but when they are in power, they quarrel to each-other." Presently there are many Akali Dals in Punjab- Akali Dal (Badal), Akali Dal (Taksali), Akali Dal (Sant Fateh Singh), Akali Dal (Amritsar), Akali Dal (Longowal), Akali Dal (Panthic), Akali Dal (Sanyukt), Akali Dal (United) but Akali Dal (Badal) is a major Akali Dal among all of these in present scenario of Punjab politics.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are as under:

1. To know about the formation and ideology of the Akali Dal.
2. To evaluate the factors responsible for the splits and mergers in the Akali Dal.
3. To highlights the rise and development of split and merger within the Akali Dal.
4. To know the impact of the split and merger in the Akali Dal on the Punjab politics.

Methodology

A modest attempt has been made in this paper to analyse the dynamics of Punjab politics by analyzing the politics of split and merger in the Akali Dal. This paper has been divided into four parts. The first part deals with the profile of the Akali Dal. The second relates with the determinants of the split within the party. Third part deals with the rise and development of split and merger in the Akali Dal and last with the conclusions. Historical and analytical approach has been used in this paper. Historical, comparative and analytical methods have been used. Both primary and secondary sources have been consulted in this study.

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Akali Dal: A Profile

The Akali Dal is the second oldest party in India, after Indian National Congress. It came into existence on December 14 1920 as the vanguard of Gurudwara Reform Movement which had been launched to protect the religious interests of the Sikh community. It is pertinent to mention here that during the 1920s, the Sikhs constituted a committee for wresting the control of shrines from corrupt Mahants who had converted these into their personal properties. The Akali Dal was formed as a semi-military corps of volunteers to raise and train men of action. It fought many successful non-violent battles in which the Sikhs made supreme sacrifices. Ultimately, the British government conceded their major demand on 15 November 1925 and handed over the management of Gurudwaras to a statutory elected body of the Sikhs- the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) ^[1]. The SGPC is generally known as 'Sikh Religious Parliament. Since then the SGPC has not been only provided legitimacy to its claim of representing the religious interest of the Sikh community, but also a powerful resource input in the pursuit of political interests of the Akali Dal. The Akali Dal has also been functioning as a fully-fledged religion based political party ^[2]. The Marxists alleged that the dominant factions in the Akali Dal represent the 'rich farmers' who have hegemony over the peasantry as a whole. They use religious appeals to mobilize the broad mass of the peasantry for their own purposes and maintain their hegemony over them as well by making use of such appeals from time to time. It claimed to be the sole representative of the Sikh community ^[3].

The membership of the Akali Dal is open only to the Sikhs and it claims to be the only true spokesman of the Sikhs-not only in Punjab but of Sikhs anywhere in the country, and even in any part of the world. But the Sikhs are concentrated in Punjab and therefore, the activities of the Akali Dal are confined to Punjab. Programmes and policies of the Akali Dal have always moved around two constants- the Sikh communalism and regionalism. As a religion based and regional party it looks upon the problems of politics from a sectional angle and as regional party, it necessarily seeks for a larger degree of autonomy within the framework of Indian federalism ^[4]. The extremist sections of the Akalis combine the two constants- Sikh communalism and regionalism under the slogan of 'Sikh Homeland.' They also demand for the incorporation of Chandigarh and other allegedly Punjabi speaking areas in the Punjab. In the context of the issues of state politics of Punjab, the Akalis uphold the interest of the rural landowning classes which are largely drawn from the Sikhs and either neglect or positively oppose the interests of the landless labour (largely Hindu Harijan) and the urban classes (largely High caste Hindus) ^[5].

Split and Merger: Determinants

The present study remains blurred without discussing the bases, the determinants and the factors responsible for emergence of split and merger in the Akali Dal. This is more so if one wishes to understand the dynamics of split and merger in the Akali Dal. Professor Gopal Singh ^[6] has expressed the view that the split and merger in the Akali Dal can be categorized as "moderates," "extremists" and "militants." He asserts that three factors have always been responsible for the split and merger in the Akali Dal. Most important of these is the struggle for power. The role of the

Congress party has become the second most important factor after independence. The third, and by far the most important factor responsible for split and merger particularly during post-1966 period, is what can be termed as Jat- Sikhs 'psyche.' Ideological differences, question of power, position, patronage and prestige, personality clash, personal gains, personal enmity, and group rivalry are some of the other factors which create and sustain split and merger. Two or more leaders within a party with an ambition to capture power and leadership have always formed their own factions. But, in the case of Jat- Sikh politics, Joyce Pettigrew⁷ attaches more importance to personal enmity while discussing Kairon and Rarewale factions in congress party. This is equally true about the Akali Dal particularly after 1962. There have always been factions on the basis of rural- urban divide in the Akali Dal. Another category of factions among Sikhs consists of those who form government and those who oppose such person. To be brief, either one of these factors, or a combination of two or more factors has been responsible for creating and sustaining factions in the Akali Dal at different points of time.

Split and Merger: Rise and Development

The study of the period of struggle for independence from 1925 to 1947 shows that there were several occasions on which the Akali Dal was split in many factions. Firstly, due to the different opinions regarding the Nehru Report on 1928 ^[8], the Akali Dal was split into three factions- led by Baba Kharak Singh, Giani Sher Singh and Mangal Singh. It was again divided into the two factions on the eve of the Second World War in 1939- led by Giani Kartar Singh and Udham Singh Nagoke. The Akali Dal was also divided into two groups on the issue of participation in Quit India Movement- led by Master Tara Singh and Partap Singh Kairon and others ^[9]. The politics of merger was started in the Akali Dal after the Independence when it was merged with the Congress party in 1948 and the Akalis joined the Congress government of East Punjab. But soon differences emerged between Congress and Akali leadership on the demand of a separate Sikh majority state. As a result the then Akali leadership decided to come out from the Congress ^[10]. After the independence a new trend had emerged in the politics of Akali Dal and it became caste oriented. Master Tara Singh, who was a Bhatia Sikh, merged his faction with the Congress with a view to weaken the hold of his opponents who belonged to Jat-Sikh peasantry. However, his differences were emerged with the Congress on the issue of the demand of Punjabi *Suba*. As a result he quit the Congress and started a *Morcha* for this purpose in 1960. When the *Morcha* did not succeed in its objective, Master Tara Singh resorted to a fast unto death in Golden Temple. But he gave up his fast on the appeal of Yadavindra Singh, Maharaja of Patiala. But his decision was regarded as a betrayal of the *Panath* and this led to the decline to his status in Sikh politics on the one hand and emergence of Sant Fateh Singh as the leader of the *Panath* on the other ^[11]. As a result split was took place in the Akali Dal. Sant Fateh Singh who was backed by a powerful Jat-Sikh peasantry introduced a secular note in Akali politics by presenting the demand of Punjabi *Suba* purely on Linguistic basis¹² which was accepted by the then central Congress government and the present state of Punjab came into existence on 1 November 1966.

Elections to Punjab Assembly were held in Punjab in 1967 after the reorganization in which Akali Dal (Sant) emerged as the second largest party and a non-Congress coalition government headed by Akali leader Gurnam Singh was formed. But Akali Dal was split into two factions when Lachman Singh Gill, an Akali leader and minister in the Akali government defected from the party with 17 MLAs in 1968 and formed a minority government with the support of the Congress ^[13]. Mid-term Assembly elections were held in Punjab in 1969 and Akali Dal (Sant) and Akali Dal (Master) decided to merge before these elections. But it was once again divided into three Akali Dals- led by Jagdev Singh Talwandi, Harchand Singh Longowal and Bhagwant Singh Danewalia after its defeat in 1980 Assembly elections. The Akali Dal (Talwandi) and Akali Dal (Longowal) decided to merge and formed the Akali Dal under the leadership of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale ^[14], a leader of the Sikh militants. The Akali Dal (Longowal) won 1985 Assembly elections and formed the government in Punjab headed by Surjit Singh Barnala on 29 September 1985. But Parkash Singh Badal left the party alongwith 27 MLAs and decided to form Akali Dal (Badal) in 1986 ^[15]. There were three Akali Dals in Punjab on the eve of the 1989 Parliamentary elections. These were- the Akali Dal (Longowal), the Akali Dal (Talwandi) and the Akali Dal (Maan). Although, the Akali Dal (Maan) emerged as the real Akali Dal in these elections but it too, could not save itself from split. Parkash Singh Badal and Baba Joginder Singh left the Akali Dal (Maan) and formed their own Akali Dals. The split again took place in the Akali Dal (Badal) and a new party, the Akali Dal (Panthic) came to existence. But, the Akali Dal (Panthic) and the Akali Dal (Longowal) decided to merge for contesting Parliamentary and Assembly elections held in February 1992 ^[16]. The Akali Dal (Badal) succeeded to win the 1997 Assembly elections and formed an Akali-BJP coalition government in Punjab. The struggle for power between Parkash Singh Badal and Gurcharan Singh Tohra culminated in the split in the Akali Dal (Badal). G.S. Tohra formed his own Akali Dal, the Sarva Hind Akali Dal. This split adversely affected the electoral performance of the Akali Dal in the 1999 Parliamentary and 2002 Assembly elections in Punjab ^[17]. As a result, these both Akali Dals decided to merge before the 2004 Parliamentary elections and succeeded in winning the elections with the big margin. It could also succeed to win the 2012 and 2017 Assembly elections and formed the Akali- BJP coalition government in Punjab.

Conclusions

The above analysis reveals that split and merger has been a constant feature of the Akali Dal since its creation. It has mainly been ascribed due to struggle for power and clash of personalities. The study also shows that the split and merger affected the performance of the Akali Dal in the various elections to the Punjab Assembly. It made difference in terms of acquiring and losing power in the state which is evident from 1969, 1977 and 2002 electoral results. The dynamics of Punjab politics in general and the Sikh politics in particular cannot be understood without the study of politics of split and merger in the Akali Dal. The electoral politics of the Akali Dal and its rival have been affected by this factor in various elections to a considerable extent. The Akalis mostly lost and its rivals won when split was took place in the Akali Dal. But on the other hand the Akalis

generally won and its rivalries generally lost whenever, Akali Dals merged.

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