

# **Analyzing The Caste Politics Of Punjab With Special Emphasis On 2024 Lok Sabha Elections**

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## **Abstract**

The paper examines the caste politics of Punjab in various dimensions. To begin with, the caste demography of Punjab has been studied in order to understand the diverse castes and sub-castes along with their behavior shown during voting for the political parties. Over the years, Punjab has seen active political participation from several parties, such as the Shiromani Akali Dal, Indian National Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, and the Aam Aadmi Party. All these parties have shown interest in winning the support of the religious communities living there by even bringing their own leaders forward who belong to those communities in order to build an amicable image of the party. Seeing a political leader from one's own community did actually succeed, but not for very long, and this was best illustrated by the example of Charanjit Singh Channi. The paper attempts to examine the reasons for caste involvement in politics and how it plays a role in enhancing the political power of the parties while drawing upon the previous election data to understand the pattern.

## **History of Caste in Punjab: An Introduction**

The religion of Sikhism is casteless. The anti-caste message of Sikhism was utilized by Sikh reformers in the late nineteenth century to distinguish Sikhism from Hinduism, in addition to the fact that the Sikh Gurus were unquestionably strong and effective critics of caste. As far as the traditional education system of India goes, it was a strong and well-built structure, and the cultural and moral values were intact. However, it was only when Lord Macaulay, a British colonial administrator and politician, emphasized how the backbone of India could be molded in order to conquer a nation that has such a strong foundation, comprising the caliber and integrity of the people. This was a decision taken to systematically dismantle the unity, heritage, culture, and education system of India. Therefore, the ancient education system was gradually replaced while Lord Macaulay ensured that Indians believed in the superiority of English as a language and the Western education system by demeaning their own. As a result, eventually, western ideologies took over the Indian mentality, and the strong cultural values were replaced by the British culture and education system, leaving an impact on how Indians perceived their own culture.

The Bhakti Movement, Sufism, the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, and the Sikh movement for human equality have all had a significant impact in Punjab, making the caste system less strong there, although it is still a part of the province's social hierarchy. The community of cultivators in Punjab defeated feudal lords during the Sikh movement while securing the top position of the social hierarchy and becoming the largest landowning caste in the state. It altered Punjab's entire societal structure. Moving forward, India has witnessed a significant dominance of the caste system, which is deeply rooted in the culture. Several states

have witnessed casteism and its interference with politics, and Punjab is one of the more visible states. There are three significant regions of Punjab to focus on - Majha, Malwa, and Doaba—that are carved by the three of these rivers. They seem to reflect their own different social, economic, and political identities. Malwa was at the top during the *farmers' protest* against the farm laws that were, however, later repealed. It is a region also known as the *Zamindari Belt*, and several rich farmers and landholders reside here. However, the place has also reported quite a lot of farmers' suicides. Even politically, the region is very dominant. 83 percent<sup>1</sup> of the state's chief ministers were elected from this region post-1966. In the past, several political parties have entered. In 2017, Arvind Kejriwal's party- Aam Aadmi Party, managed to secure 18 seats,<sup>2</sup> which was applauded given that it did not show a satisfactory performance in Majha and Doaba. Similarly, several other parties also entered state politics. Majha is known as the Sikh '*panthic*' or religious belt and also comprises a very religious population. This factor makes it important for matters pertaining to elections in the state. Doaba, the third region, is often the center of politics in the Dalit community. It is also referred to as the NRI Belt of Punjab.

The caste system was not prevalent from the beginning; in fact, the system has been condemned by the Sikh community in Guru Granth Sahib Ji.<sup>3</sup> People who were a part of this community would regard each other with equality and be judged on the basis of their deeds. Hence, there was no place for division on the basis of *high* and *low* birth. More importance was given to the good conduct of a human being with no ego. Additionally, they also did not believe in the caste demarcation of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, or Shudras or the fact that one was superior to the other. Eventually, the topic of caste became taboo in the community; however, today it does exist as a serious issue in rural Punjab and also seems to be a significant factor in its intersection with the politics of the state.

In 2009, Buta Singh, the chairperson of the National Commission of Scheduled Castes, emphasized how Dalit atrocities were rising across the nation despite constant monitoring. The spotlight was on Punjab, as it was predicted to be in the fifth position in the entire country. Scheduled castes have been particularly targeted in Punjab. The beginning of the caste system in Punjab can be traced back to when the Jats increased in numbers and eventually were viewed as a major part of the Sikh community. The increase in population as well as landholdings removed the *low status* and image while also strengthening the community. The Jats make up around 20-25 percent<sup>4</sup> of the total population of the state, enjoying the status of the *single-largest* community. It was during the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, that the Jats were able to secure a powerful position in contrast with their former status. Additionally, land ownership enhanced their standing within Sikhism.

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<sup>1</sup> [Malwa, Majha, and Doaba: Divided by rivers, each Punjab region has distinct political identity](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Malwa, Majha, and Doaba: Divided by rivers, each Punjab region has distinct political identity](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Social Revolution- Sikh religion and castes](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Jat Sikh population](#)

**The Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900** was a contributing factor to the Jats' agricultural caste position by prohibiting all the non-agricultural castes, such as Tarkhans and the scheduled castes, from accessing any land holdings. Several other factors, such as factionalism, economic developments, party competitions, and widening social inequalities, created a political divide within the Jat community. The upper castes among the Sikhs had very little role to play in politics over a period of time. These were the Alhuwalis, Khatri, Aroras, and Chuhars, to name a few. With promises of assuring due representation and other necessary benefits, the political parties have also formed alliances and coalitions based on caste. This way, political parties make an effort to secure the position of communities. Dalits also constitute a significant part of the population, posing a challenge to the strength of the Jats when it comes to the political arena. The Sikh community, on the other hand, also often engages in conflicts such as caste and its intersection with politics.

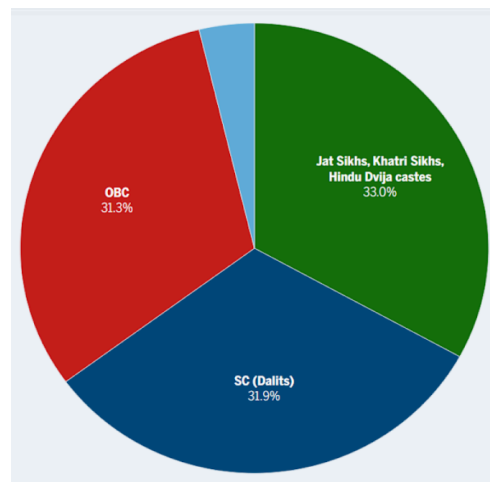
Traditionally, the community does not endorse the caste system, but in contrast to their belief, there are caste divisions within the community that serve as the cause of several identity conflicts. The caste politics, however, even differ across the different regions of Punjab, as the Malwa region has different political dynamics compared to the Doaba or Majha regions. Caste may have been a prominent factor in politics, but there has been a shift of focus to other factors such as economic development, drug abuse, the political divide, etc. that have played a role in the changing electoral politics, and they continue to influence the alliances and the strategies. Political parties such as the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Bahujan Samaj Party are staunch representatives of the Jat Sikhs and the Dalits, respectively, prioritizing issues pertaining to their communities in order to secure their long-term position in electoral politics as they cater to the two biggest groups in the state.

## **Punjab Alienation Act, 1900**

After being passed in 1900, the act was brought into effect in 1901 by the British Raj in order to limit the transfer of land ownership in Punjab. Within the act, they created a category called the 'agricultural tribes' category. In order to buy or sell land in Punjab, it was necessary to be a member of this category. The act, however, faced a backlash. During the *1899 Lucknow Session*, the act was also opposed by the Indian National Congress. The main objective of this act was to prevent the land from being taken away from the traditional landowners, as the moneylenders would often acquire it. As a consequence, moneylenders, shopkeepers, and professionals turned against the government and this act. It can be said that the act was heavily influenced by the system during the colonial period when only the urban moneylenders had the right to own land. The act classified two main categories- 'agriculturist' and 'non-agriculturist' and then they limited the transfer of land among the two categories. This was a measure widely opposed, as the original ownership of the land no longer held any value.

Punjab was an agriculturally rich state, and the field held great importance to its people in terms of investing capital and earning their livelihood. The majority of the state was involved in agricultural activities, and therefore, one of the motives of this act was defined as the effort to protect the agricultural character of the region while also preventing any kind of economic exploitation. Whoever belonged to the non-agriculturist group was not allowed to purchase the land without the local government's permission. In a nutshell, provisions of this act made it difficult for the non-agriculturists who resided in the urban areas. However, for the Jat Sikhs, the position of their community strengthened as they majorly dominated the agriculture sector. The reason, however, was that the act was severely criticized because of how it limited opportunities for non-agriculturists.

## Caste Demography in Punjab

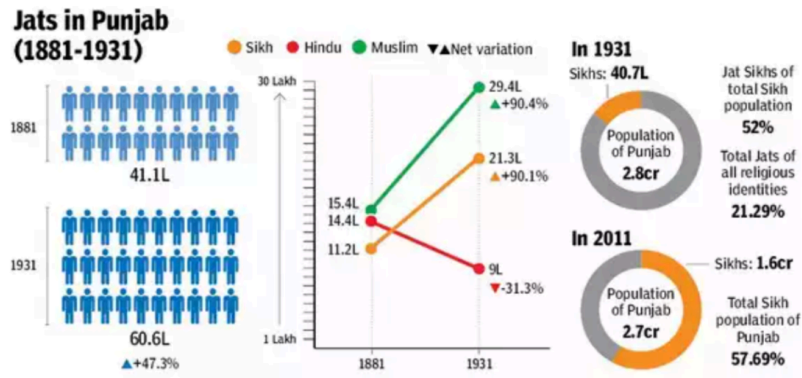


Caste Divisions In Punjab

Image Courtesy -The Times of India

### 1. Jat Sikhs, Khatri, and Hindus

There are several major castes that exist in Punjab. The Jat Sikhs are the most dominant and are commonly referred to as the agrarian caste. They constitute 20-25 percent of the total population and may have an influence on 55-60 seats. The Jat Sikhs are regarded as the most influential group in the politics of the state. After the reorganization that took place in 1966, Punjab saw Chief Ministers coming from only this community. They have also had two of the most *influential* leaders- Prakash Singh Badal and Captain Amarinder Singh



Jat Sikhs in Punjab

Image Courtesy -The Times of India

## 1.1 Role in Politics

In the context of the Jat Sikhs and their population share, it was deduced that apart from them, 82 percent of the population did not hold any proper share of power in Punjab. This is contrary to the data derived from the census held in 1931, which showed that the Jats were 52 percent of the total population before the reorganization. Data indicates that the community held 57.69 percent of the population. Analyzing both the census data and the community, it can be safely concluded that the community is in fact the single largest group across all the castes and religious identities. Politically speaking, they do not just source their power from the fact that they are large in numbers but also from the other Sikh communities.

Caste is one of the dominant factors in the political arena of Punjab, and when it comes to the religious identity among the Sikhs, it overpowers all the other identities, specifically in times of crisis. This can be better understood with the example of the resistance shown towards the *farm laws*. Most of the people who showed popular dissent belonged to the community of Jat Sikhs. Another instance is based on the experience of the Mazhabi Sikhs- who make up the lowest strata of the caste. They were the ones taken to Shillong by the British Army as sweepers since no other community was willing to come forward to do such menial jobs.

## 2. Scheduled Castes

The Scheduled Castes of Punjab make up approximately 32.8 percent<sup>5</sup>. They are divided on the grounds of their religious and cultural identities. Furthermore, there are other caste divisions within the Sikh community, such as the scheduled castes mentioned below-

- a) Mazhabis - Presence in Bhatinda, Mansa, Amritsar, and the district of Taran Taran

<sup>5</sup>[SCHEDULED CASTES SUB PLAN](#)

- b) Ravidassias, Rehgars, Raigars- Kapurthala, Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Doaba
- c) Remdasias - Ropar, Moga, and Faridkot districts
- d) Raisikhs- Ferozepur

Dalit demographics in the state-

- a) Doaba- 37 percent
- b) Malwa- 31 percent
- c) Majha- 29 percent<sup>6</sup>

## 2.1 Role in Politics

Politics in Punjab can be traced back to the significant movement of Kanshi Ram, who was a popular Bahujan leader. According to him, the political aspirations of a society can only be successful if its non-political roots are strong. He emphasized anti-caste awareness among the people who identify themselves as Bahujans by debunking Brahminism. The Kanshi Ram movement also came to be known as the Bahujan Movement and was recognized as both social and political. As a Dalit leader and social activist, Kanshi Ram aimed at empowering the Bahujans. The reason why it was recognized as a social movement was because it also attempted to remove the caste-based discrimination and hierarchies that existed in Indian society for years. The objective of this movement was to eliminate the hierarchy while establishing a system of equality. This was followed by the establishment of the Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984, aimed at providing a political platform for Bahujans. As a political party, the BSP primarily targeted the Dalits and OBCs in Punjab when they entered its electoral politics. Kanshi Ram and his party collectively tried to unite the SCs and the backward classes in the category of Dalits.

Dalits and OBCs comprise a major portion of the state's population, and the party's focus was on factors such as social justice, reservation policies, and aggregate economic development. These were some of the most significant issues that the people of the state identified with. However, its performance in the political sphere of the state was not constantly satisfactory. For example, in 1992, their seat share was nine, and it came down to one in the 1997 elections, while their vote share was recorded to decline from 16.2% to 7.5%. Despite the alliance formed with the Indian National Congress in the 1998 elections, it could not manage to make it to the Lok Sabha. Again, in 1999, Kanshi Ram led the party to form an alliance with the United Front, but they could not secure any seats in the parliamentary polls. After the elections of 1997, they did not win any seats in the assembly or parliamentary polls in Punjab. Despite its promise to represent the oppressed classes, it could not appeal to the masses, and its vote share declined along the way. This indicated that people are no longer interested in caste-based or religion-based politics.

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<sup>6</sup> In Absolute numbers, Malwa has the highest population

As far as the Scheduled Castes are concerned, the state has a history of the influence of the Valmiki community, who were earlier known as *untouchables*. They have been known to influence social, cultural, and political spheres. Speaking of their political preference, they have mainly stayed with the Congress. Mazhabi Sikhs, on the other hand, who are also recognized as Scheduled Castes by the government, are largely rural-based and their political preferences are inclined towards the Akali Dal and Congress. People from the Valmiki community have been elected to several political offices, such as the Punjab Legislative Assembly. Being elected gives them due representation in the electoral sphere of the state while also addressing concerning issues. Belonging to the scheduled caste, they also constitute a relatively larger population of the state, which makes them a powerful vote bank for the political parties. Leaders and politicians from this community have expressed their strong views on bringing up policies and programs that support their community.

With respect to the 2022 Assembly elections in Punjab, Charanjit Singh Channi stepped forth as the first Dalit Sikh Chief Minister, coming from the Ravidasiya community and representing the India National Congress. Except for Doaba- a region that predominantly belongs to the Ravidasiya community of the state, the strategy did not seem to have any impact elsewhere. In the assembly elections of the state, several parties have given their priorities to the votes that were cast by the Dalits. Akali Dal, a Sikh-dominated political party, was also at the forefront of announcing the selection of a Deputy Chief Minister from the Dalit community. This was driven by the fact that the Dalit community held a considerable share of the state population. A lot of people from the community, however, have shifted overseas and are also serving in recognized government jobs. As a result, Dalits are now more socially, economically, and politically forward compared to others.

Charanjit Singh Channi, however, tried to portray his image as similar to that of a common man. He did claim that he would drive an auto-rickshaw and engage in activities like fodder cutting and drinking tea from a bowl, milking, etc This was a relatively intelligent move in convincing the people, as this is what the majority of them did. This is also the first time that the word Dalit has been used with no hesitation and more casually in the politics of Punjab, and it is in fact regarded as one of the ways of enhancing the self-esteem of the community. The creation of a Dalit chief minister appears to be paying off for the Congress. The selection of Channi as the first Chief Minister was also a moment of assurance for his community's people. This is one way of empowering the community and their representation in the political arena. As far as the Dalits are concerned, they are not homogeneous by nature. There are up to 39 sub-castes<sup>7</sup> among Dalits in Punjab and they are also spread across five major religions, the Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists, as well as several other sectors such as the Ramdasias, Kabirpanthis, Balmikis, Radha Soamis, etc. As their choices for political parties vary, Dalits are likewise a diverse group politically.

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<sup>7</sup> India Today: 2018 report by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment



They have divergent political allegiances. The political division can be explained by the fact that of the total 25 percent reservation of 39 castes, 12.5 percent is reserved for two communities

- a) Balimikis
- b) Mazhabis

Another 12.5 percent is reserved for the 37 castes.

### 3) Deras

In addition to Sikhism, Punjab is well-known for a number of Deras, or religious groups, which are frequently referred to as the inferior forms of institutionalized religion. In the past thirty years, several years have emerged as a result of the large following they earned. According to Pramod Kumar, a political scientist from Chandigarh, the Deras portray themselves as messengers between people and God, which is why they are referred to as the *poor cousins of institutionalized religion*. Up to 3,000 Deras<sup>8</sup>, each with a distinctive spiritual message, are thought to exist in north India. Their struggle against societal issues like drug and alcohol addiction, caste prejudice, marital violence, etc., is what unites them, though. Sacha Sauda, Radhasoami, Sachkhand Ballan, Nurmahal, Nirankari, and Namdhari are the biggest deras in Punjab and its adjoining states. Within the community of Sikhs, some of the Namdhari Sikhs are known to visit the Deras for various reasons, such as their beliefs or being a part of the social activities by visiting the Deras. The Dera leaders expanded into different industries and became powerful landowners as a result of the immense influence they held. Radhey Ma, along with others like Gurmeet Singh, quickly transformed their deras into a modern, market-based society. The higher caste-led political class was forced to work with the Dera chiefs in order to motivate voters because of their massive following and general disdain for established faiths.

Deras took on the role of the new middleman between the political parties and the underprivileged. Deras, a powerful combination of alternative spirituality and employment, were not only alluring but also viewed as saviors in a climate when governments scarcely invested in social infrastructure like cheap healthcare, education, and jobs. However, there have been clashes between Deras and the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabhandhak Committee, or the SGPC, where they asked the Dera Sacha Suda campuses to be removed from Punjab, even if that move were to be unconstitutional. SGPC is referred to as the *mini parliament* of the Sikhs as they manage the Sikh gurudwaras in Punjab. However, there have been clashes between the Deras and the SGPC. One such instance revolves around the Dera Sacha Sauda and the SGPC, when the Dera's leader, Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, was held responsible for dressing like the tenth and final living

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<sup>8</sup> [The Mix Of Religion, Welfare And Politics That Is Ram Rahim Singh's Dera](#)

of Sikh Guru Gobind Singh by donning a *turban* and a *kalgi*, or an egret feather. This was viewed as an action that hurt the religious sentiments of the people and entered into a conflict with the Sikh and Hindu groups. The matter escalated to such a huge level that it ended up in protests and widespread clashes as the Sikh leaders expressed their disappointment.

As far as the deras and their intersection with politics are concerned, there are broadly six Deras in the state-

<b>Deras</b>	<b>Influence on Constituencies</b>
Dera Sacha Sauda	27
Radha Soami Satsang Beas	19
Noormahal Dera	8
Sant Nirankari Mission	4
Namdhari Sect	2
Dera Sachkhand Ballan	8

These Deras have been able to successfully influence 68 assembly constituencies during the elections. Deras play a significant role in Punjab's social structure and control a sizable portion of the Dalit vote there. They can be found in almost all Punjabi villages. Along with contributing to the region's religious and cultural life, they also have an impact on the politics of Majha, Malwa, and Doaba. For the underprivileged populations of Punjab, who have endured caste prejudice and violence for many years, Deras has evolved as an alternative sociocultural space. Deras have individual personalities. Given that they assert they do not support any political party, it is difficult to anticipate how they would express their political preference. However, Dera chiefs also frequently exercise indirect political power because they have a considerable number of followers behind them.

### **3.1 Role in Politics**

This is also a reason why, during the state elections, it can be observed how all the political parties pay their respects to the different Deras. Even in the case of Charanjit Singh Channi, he was able to manage support from the Ravidas Deras by depending on the influence of the community, as he too belonged to the Ravidasia sub-caste. Along with its Sirsa headquarters, politicians from the BJP, Congress, Akali Dal, and other parties could be spotted visiting Dera Sacha Sauda in Salabatpura, Bathinda, to seek blessings. It's interesting to note that the community and Akali Dal leadership this time around showed little interest in visiting deras, and they specifically avoided going to Dera Sacha Sauda because of an issue that caused a

reaction in the 2017 elections. After the detained chief disguised as Guru Gobind Singh and several of his followers were charged with blasphemy, Sikhs became incensed with the DSS.

One of the representatives of the Dera community also denied involvement in political activities and confirmed that they would only engage in religious and welfare activities, but also mentioned that there is a political wing that looks into political decisions. According to analysts, there are hundreds of deras, but only six major deras influence the elections.<sup>9</sup> However, they have also been on the receiving end of severe political backlash and have in fact decided to stay aloof from the political parties by not showing support to any particular political party in order to avoid any potential backlash. They are known to hold a strong influence over 50 constituencies but exclude any major role in the 2022 assembly elections

Deras also had a role to play in the establishment of the first BJP administration in Haryana in 2014. This was connected to the case against Gurmeet Ram Rahim. Although the dera has a history of supporting different political parties in Punjab's recent elections, this was the first time the sect had publicly engaged in electoral politics in Haryana. For the 'blessings' of the Dera head, numerous top BJP officials traveled to Sirsa in October 2014 after the political branch of the Dera declared its support for the BJP in the assembly elections. Though the dera had supported candidates in the past, it happened officially for the first time in Haryana. Political analysts claimed that the BJP's triumph in the most recent assembly election was made possible by the Sirsa-based Dera's decision to support the party.

## **Castes and their vote shares**

### **A) Shiromani Akali Dal and the Indian National Congress**

Traditionally, the Mazhabis and Ramdasias were seen voting for the Akali Dal, while the Balmikis and Chamars voted for the Congress.

Share of the Jat Sikh Votes with respect to the **2007** elections<sup>10</sup>

- a) Shiromani Akali Dal- 61 percent
- b) Indian National Congress- 30 percent

Share of the Jat Sikh Votes with respect to the **2012** elections

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<sup>9</sup>Political analyst Professor Pramod Kumar, Director of the Institute for Development and Communication (IDC)

<sup>10</sup>[Sharpening Caste And Religious Identity Politics In The Punjab Elections](#)

- a) Shromani Akali Dal- 52 percent
- b) Indian National Congress- 31 percent

Share of the Jat Sikh Votes with respect to the **2017** elections

- a) Shiromani Akali Dal- 37 percent
- b) Indian National Congress- 28 percent
- c) Aam Aadmi Party- 30 percent

### **OBC Sikh Vote share in the State Assembly Elections ( 2002-2017 )**

The ‘Other Backward Castes’ comprise almost 31 percent<sup>11</sup> of the state’s population but are considered to be almost invisible in politics.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Congress</b>	<b>SAD-BJP</b>	<b>AAP</b>
<b>2002</b>	39%	32%	—
<b>2007</b>	43%	43%	—
<b>2012</b>	44%	46%	—
<b>2017</b>	37%	32%	26%

### **Dalit-Hindu Vote share in the State Assembly Elections ( 2002-2017 )**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Congress</b>	<b>SAD-BJP</b>	<b>AAP</b>
<b>2002</b>	47%	11%	—
<b>2007</b>	56%	25%	—
<b>2012</b>	37%	33%	—
<b>2017</b>	43%	26%	21%

### **Dalit-Sikh Vote Share in the State Assembly Elections ( 2002-2017 )**

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<sup>11</sup> [Sharpening Caste And Religious Identity Politics In The Punjab Elections](#)

Year	Congress	SAD-BJP	AAP
2002	33%	26%	—
2007	49%	32%	—
2012	51%	34%	—
2017	41%	34%	19%

### **Non-Dalit Hindu Vote Share in the State Assembly Elections (2002-2017)**

Year	Congress	SAD-BJP	AAP
2002	52%	26%	—
2007	49%	38%	—
2012	46%	36%	—
2017	48%	22%	23%

## **B) Castes and their preferred Political Parties**

### **Non-Dalit Hindus**

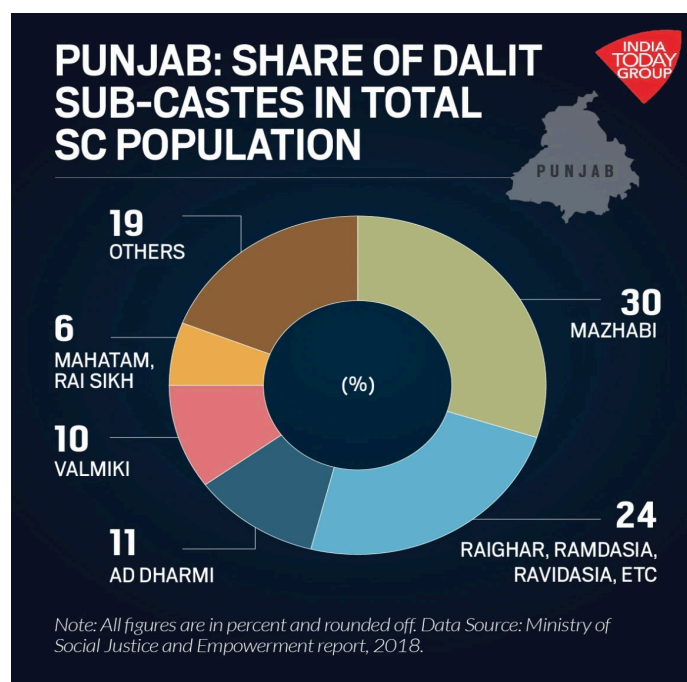
In the table above (Non-Dalit Hindu vote share), it can be observed how Congress earlier held a share of 46% and then increased its share to 48% while the other parties- SAD-BJP and the AAP—had a relatively lower share. This is a result of the analysts' anxious public reaction with respect to the relationship of the AAP with the radical Sikhs, as they fear that the consequence could be the rise of militancy in Punjab. The vote share in urban areas is important, specifically because it shows the participation level of non-Dalit Hindus. They have also shown interest in the farmer's movement, which is also taken into account.

### **Dalits**

The caste system that exists in Punjab is more about their economic and political limitations than it is about them being untouchables. The history of the community goes back to the time of large-scale conversions, where Dalits were converted to Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity. Consequently, the Dalits who converted to Islam are called Mussalis; those who converted to Sikhism are called Mazhabis; and those who converted to Christianity are called Masih. They left Hinduism to avoid prejudice, exploitation, and humiliation by converting to other faiths. According to the 2011 census, it is 31.9% in Punjab. This is India's largest

population of Scheduled Castes. In Punjab, 39 castes have been designated as scheduled castes. Of these 39 castes, Ad-Dharmi, Chamars, Ravidasia, Sikhs, Ramdasias, Balmikis, and Mazhabi Sikhs make up the Scheduled Caste, which has historically struggled with identity.

Dalit voters are crucial for all mainstream parties. Additionally, during the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections, it was seen that the BJP's share of the votes increased from 19 percent to 27 percent. This was expected to rise while Congress's share of votes was anticipated to decrease from 45 percent in 2019<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, Congress could not have relied on winning and coming to power solely on the basis of Dalits. This is true for a state like Punjab that exhibits diversity in terms of religions, castes, subcastes, and even cultures. According to the analysts, the idea of using the 'exclusivity' factor to favor their political position is not regarded as a feasible idea given the electoral politics of Punjab and its diversity.<sup>13</sup> This was also one of the significant reasons why Channi's hold in state politics could not persist for a long time despite leaving a considerably impressive impact in terms of being selected as a *dalit sikh*. In Punjab, there are Hindu and Sikh Dalits. Since many Hindu Dalits have accepted Sikh religious practices throughout the years and some sub-castes, such as the Ravidasias and Ad Dharmis, have been demanding separate religious identities, exact numbers are always shifting.



Share of Dalit Sub-Castes in the SC population

Image Courtesy -India Today

The nomination of Charanjit Singh Channi to the top position in place of Jat Sikh Amarinder Singh was viewed as a reward for the community's support of the Congress. According to data from the Lokniti-CSDS survey, the Grand Old Party has benefited greatly from both Hindu and Sikh Dalit votes in

<sup>12</sup> CSDS-LOKNITI data, Indian Express, August 1, 2021; federal.com, Sept. 21, 2021

<sup>13</sup> Analyst Pramod Kumar (The Hindu, Jan. 13, 2022)

the four elections since 2012. The BJP was the third political party that Dalit voters trusted up until 2012, but the entry of the AAP caused further splintering among Dalit voters among the four parties. It's interesting to note that in the last two assembly elections, the BSP was unable to win even one seat. The main factor in the dispersion of Dalit voters is that they do not adhere to any one school of thought. The BSP moved its attention to Uttar Pradesh because it was unable to win over many Dalit voters in Punjab. Congress has steadily increased the number of Hindu Dalits who vote for it. As opposed to 37% in the 2012 assembly elections, it earned a staggering 58% of Hindu Dalit votes in the 2019 Lok Sabha election.

Contrarily, support for the Congress among Sikh Dalits fell from 51% in 2012 to 35% in 2019. The SAD-BJP alliance gathered 26 percent Sikh Dalit and 27 percent Hindu Dalit votes in 2019. In 2017, the vote share of Hindu Dalits was 26 percent, and for Sikh Dalits, it was 34 percent. Punjab's political arena saw AAP's advent after the 2014 Lok Sabha election. In their first-ever election in the state, the Aam Aadmi Party scored a sizable 23 percent of the vote and took home four seats in parliament. In both the federal elections of 2014 and the 2017 assembly elections, a sizeable portion of the Dalit population supported the AAP. This assistance was given at the expense of BSP. The Dalits continue to be economically and politically disenfranchised despite making up about 32% of Punjab's population. To put things in perspective, the Jats make up just over 20% of the population. In Punjab, unlike Uttar Pradesh, the Dalits' numerical strength has not translated into political clout. The Dalits are not a uniform community that casts votes in unison, which is one of the main causes of this. Those who are scattered around the state and belong to several caste groupings are referred to as "Dalits." Many Dalits also take their religious deras (religious abodes or sects) into consideration when making political decisions.

The SCs in Punjab are also very diverse in terms of their political affiliations. It is often believed that Chamars and Balmikis are more closely aligned with the Congress party, whereas Mazhabis, Ramdasias, Rai Sikhs, and Sansis are supporters of the Akali Dal. Punjab no longer has a unified BSP. Instead, the Bahujan Samaj Morcha, the BSP (Nahar), the BSP (Ambedkarite), the BSP (Democratic), the Bahujan Kranti Dal, the BSP (Kainth), the Bahujan Samaj Vikash Party (BHSVP), and the Bahujan Shakti Party are dividing the Dalit votes. The BSP is no longer successful in Punjab due to these different groups. The early BSP organization in Punjab was dominated by the Chamars and Ad-Dharmis. The Congress and the SAD are the two major political parties that Dalits in the Doaba region have dealt with when it comes to political power. Voters are inclined to support that party since it has a chance to win the majority. However, Dalits are angry at both the Congress and the SAD for using them as a voting bloc. The BSP needs to get directly involved in the day-to-day issues that Dalits face in order to be a viable option for both parties. Without such engagement in their daily issues, many Dalits do not perceive them as a viable alternative to the Congress and the Akali Dal.

### **Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs**

Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs are sub-castes of the Dalit community. The roots of both these castes are the same. However, Balmikis follow the Hindu religion while the Mazhabi Sikhs follow Sikhism. Mazhabi and

Balmikis continue to lag far behind in the political, educational, and socioeconomic domains. The Mazhabi Sikhs are primarily found in Punjab's Malwa and Majha regions, where they work as laborers in agriculture or construction. They were members of the Chuhra or Bhangi caste at first, but they converted to Sikhism and gave up their custom of sweeping and scavenging to work as farm laborers. The Chuhra, Bhangi, the state's fourth-ranking SC caste, accounted for an additional 9.8% of the total Dalit population. The combined population of these two castes accounted for 39.5%, or nearly two-fifths, of the state's total SC population. Though they are few, some of them have been successful in landing positions as a result of their degree and by using certain reservation benefits.

The Balmikis continue to engage in scavenging, primarily in urban areas. Due to the employment opportunities in the municipalities, that was the cause of their relocation to the cities. Even though their positions in towns paid well, they began to shun school because it wasn't necessary to have a degree to perform scavenging work in communities. Furthermore, they were ignorant and oblivious, in addition to being socially backward due to this dirty vocation. When it comes to reservations, Mazhabi Sikhs and Balmikis could not get much benefit from reservations due to their socioeconomic and political backwardness. In Punjab, the most prominent Dalit caste is the Mazhabi or Mazhabi Sikh. They accounted for 29.7% of the state's total Dalit population in 2011. When it comes to political preferences, in past election results, it has been observed that the Mazhabis, Ramdasias, Rai Sikhs, and Sansis support the Akali Dal. This pattern, however, was not constant, as the 2022 election patterns indicate how the freebies influenced the change in political preferences.

## **Chamars**

In every aspect of life, Chamars have had greater success in changing their circumstances. They have developed their long-standing trade in leather, primarily in the Punjabi Doaba region, where they have built factories and complexes. A large number of them have immigrated abroad. Their economic circumstances have also improved as a result of migration. The Ad-Dharm movement, which Babu Mangoo Ram launched in the Doaba region in 1925, also played a part in raising awareness among the Chamars. In the 1931 census, a large number of people converted to Ad-Dharma, and now, among Punjab's dalit population, Ad-Dharmis are the most intelligent and conscious. Babu Mango Ram Mugowalia, an NRI from the Doaba area of Punjab who immigrated to America, founded the Ad-Dharm movement. This movement against social inequality and untouchability was founded by him. He appealed to all of Punjab's dalit population, but sadly, the Ad-Dharmis or Chamars dominated the movement, which was restricted to the Doaba area. For a long time, Dalits were not fully able to identify with this movement due to other categories. When it comes to political preferences, Chamars and Balmikis are generally considered to be closer to the Congress party.

With the exception of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in the 1990s and the Republican Party of India, which specifically started operating in Punjab in the 1960s, Punjab has not codified a clear and direct



relationship between political party and caste. The BSP's early triumph is history, and what little of the party remains is gradually disintegrating through splits and mergers with the SAD and the Congress Party, two of the state's major political parties. It is possible to draw the conclusion that pressure politics via caste associations is all that remains of any significance in Punjabi caste politics. The Chamars in Doaba are viewed as possible allies, as the BSP is not a political force there. Nonetheless, the Chamars' ability to mobilize without governmental interference is constantly limited by the political goals of any party, as there is always a chance of upsetting other pressure groups. There is considerably more to the political space than just elections and ballots.

The Ad-dharmis and the Ravidasias, two groups of Chamars, have historically supported the Congress; currently, their opinions on the Congress and the BSP. The Ramdasias, Chamars have been voting for the SAD. Among the Bhangis, the Valmikis voted for the Congress, the Mazabis for the SAD, and the Christian Masihis for the Congress. These elections have been greatly impacted by the Mazabis. The Mazabis' victory is partially due to the Chamars' defeat, but it is also a product of how different constituencies are designated as reserved. With the exception of Doaba, the majority of the reserved constituencies this time had Mazabi concentrations.

Political Party	Doaba	Majha	Malwa	Total
Congress	1	2	7	10
SAD	5	4	12	21
BJP	2	1	-	3
Total	8	7	19	34
Percentage of the total seats (117)	34.78	28.00	27.54	29.06

Region-wise Performance of Political Parties among Reserved Seats for Scheduled Castes

**Source-** Source: The Tribune, 7 March 2012.

The table makes it evident that the SAD has outperformed the Congress in every region. In the Doaba region, the scheduled castes have the largest percentage of seats designated for them. An effort was undertaken to find out the elected Dalits' caste history.<sup>1</sup> It's interesting to note that there are eight Chamars/Ramdasias and eight Mazabis, the largest species. Among the newly elected Dalit MLAs, the Bhangi caste has emerged as the most numerous if we include the two Valmiki candidates. Since the caste system is both structural and ideological, the Dalit organization's attempts to assert their identities may not always result in a change in the caste system. Additionally, the mindset may perpetuate

hierarchy, which leads to exclusions in the public and private spheres. For example, the Balmikis and Meghs showed no interest in what was happening during any of the Chamars' mobilizations.

## **Nai Caste**

In Punjab, Nai Sikhs are a respected caste. The majority of this caste's Nai Sikh members are no longer barbers. They work for the government and are employed as physicians, engineers, farmers, teachers, drivers, and business people. The state of Punjab in northern India is home to the majority of Sikhs. Smaller communities can also be found in the USA, England, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as all over India. Eastern Punjabi is the main language spoken by Sikhs. English and Hindi are also widely spoken. Among the Nai Sikhs, there are known to be no believers. The Nai community may play a more influential role due to their numerical strength, whereas in other regions, their impact might be less prominent.

## **Kamboj**

Many political parties in Punjab have addressed the concerns of various communities, including the Kamboj community, and incorporated their interests into their political agendas in an effort to win over these people to their cause. Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Shiromani Akali Dal, Indian National Congress, and a number of other smaller or regional parties have made an effort to win over the Kamboj community and other sections of society. Like other OBC communities, the Kamboj community's political choices frequently depend on how well-accountable political parties or candidates are to their issues. These worries may center on problems with employment, social welfare, education, and economic growth. In an attempt to gain the support of OBC communities, such as the Kamboj, parties frequently create policies or make pledges for them. Any particular caste or community, like the Kamboj caste in Punjab or any other region, does not have a set voting pattern. Members of a specific caste or community may vote for multiple political parties depending on a range of variables, such as personal convictions, local issues, candidate attractiveness, party policy, and historical allegiances. Members of these groups often hold divergent political ideas.

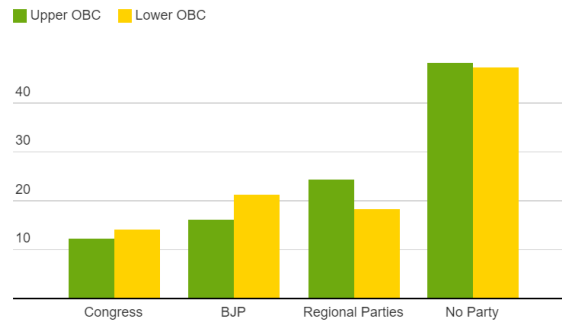
## **Other Backward Classes**

The BJP no longer holds strong support among the lower OBCs.<sup>14</sup> In fact, if the BJP does benefit the group with any of its decisions, it may call for dissent from the upper section of the OBCs and the powerful middle castes. In every election between 1996 and 2009, the Congress outperformed the BJP in terms of OBC support.<sup>15</sup> In 2014, the BJP managed to turn the tables, taking a 19-point lead among OBCs.

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<sup>14</sup> Data from National Election Studies (NES) conducted by the Lokniti research program at

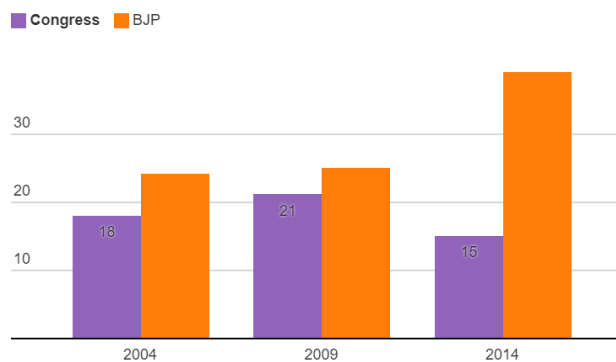
<sup>15</sup> NES Data report



The proportion of voters (in %) identifying themselves as loyal or traditional supporters of a party.

**Image Courtesy** -The Mint

Greater among lower OBCs than upper OBCs was the BJP's lead over the Congress. With respect to the states where the BJP and Congress are in direct contest and states where they compete with each other in the presence of strong regional parties, the BJP has a significant advantage over the Congress when it comes to OBC support. Additionally, figures indicate a notable rise in OBC support for the BJP in both types of states in 2014. On the other hand, even in its longtime strongholds, Congress has been losing OBC support.<sup>16</sup>



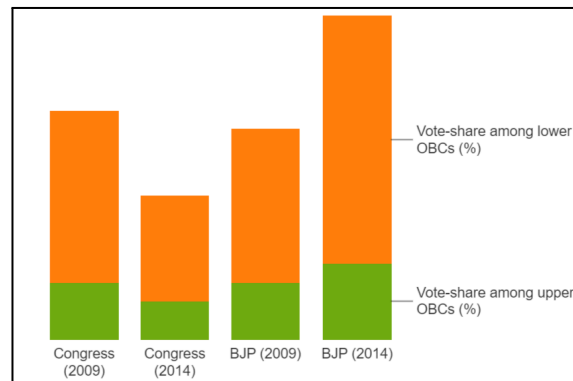
Vote share among OBCs in states where BJP and Congress fights each other and regional parties

**Image Courtesy** -The Mint

OBC communities in Punjab, such as the Saini, Lubana, Tarkhan, and other non-Jat groups, have actively participated in state politics. They have garnered attention from political parties and leaders due to their numerical strength and localized influence, especially in certain pockets of the state. In order to win over OBC populations, political parties frequently address issues with social welfare, jobs, economic development, and educational possibilities. Given that these groups play a significant role in local politics and elections, some parties have made specific policies or promises aimed at them. Punjab's political environment has previously been dominated by Jat Sikhs, but OBC's influence has been steadily growing.

<sup>16</sup> NES Data report

They have demonstrated a propensity to back political parties or individuals who deal with their concerns and offer them chances to improve socially and economically.



Vote Share of Political Parties among OBCs

Image Courtesy -NES (2009, 2014) and The Mint

## Jat Sikhs

The most prominent politicians in the state come from the Jat Sikh community, which owns the most resources in one of the most affluent states in India. Beginning in the late 19th century and continuing through the post-colonial era until 1970, government policies perpetuated, supported, and enhanced the Jat Sikh community's supremacy in Punjab's social, political, and economic spheres. The Jat Sikhs and other landowning castes hold the top spot in the caste system in rural Punjab. As far as the political impact goes, any given group's political views, including those of Jat Sikhs in Punjab, can differ greatly depending on a wide range of criteria, including socioeconomic level, cultural influences, regional considerations, and personal beliefs. It's crucial to remember that not every member of a given group has the same political beliefs. The Jat Sikhs are a prominent and powerful community in Punjab who have historically been heavily involved in state politics. They've been connected to numerous political groups and parties.

Still, a number of factors, including regional concerns, social welfare, economic development, agricultural policy, and religious considerations, may have an impact on their political views. According to analysts, it can be understood that the power and agrarian dominance of the Jat Sikhs has been declining in the political arena of the state. This is an issue of concern among the people of the community. If the community of the Jat Sikhs is to be compared with that of the Hindus, what separates the two from each other is that Jat Sikhs do not practice Khap Panchayats or caste affiliations at all. With the exception of the Jat Sikhs, almost every caste is represented in Punjab. At every stage of the official political procedures of the state, the Jats Sikhs' social, cultural, and economic dominance is evident. Every political party has a disproportionate number of Jat Sikh members, with the exception of the BJP. Giani Zail Singh was the only chief minister of Punjab who was not a Jat following the creation of the Punjabi Suba in 1966. The sarpanch would inevitably come from the caste of landowners at the village level. The Sarpanch would be a Jat landowner's nominee if the village is covered by the 73rd Amendment.

The elected Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) is also under the leadership of Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), suggesting that the Jat Sikhs are involved. Everything that occurs in a Punjabi village bears the 15-jat imprint. Every conflict involving landowners has been directed towards the Jats. Jats are a party in every dispute that arises during panchayat elections between the Dalits and the upper caste. It also means that any discussion of a shift in the rural Punjabi caste system must include whether or not it has impacted or challenged the Jat Sikh community's standing. Examining shifts in Punjab's caste system is crucial in light of all these concerns. Within the Sikh community, the Jat Sikhs made up both the top caste and the dominating caste. Even now, Jat Sikhs still make up the majority upper caste in Punjab. Punjab is not a place where the concept of the dominant caste is applicable. The Jats are the dominant caste and the upper caste, so opposing or contesting them is a way to call into question the caste system. The identities of the Ad-dharmi and Chamar have converged throughout time. Caste associations function as pressure groups; political parties are players vying for power; and the interplay between the two is how Shah (ibid.) analyzes caste politics.

With the exception of the Republican Party of India, which started operating in Punjab in the 1960s, and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which did so in the 1990s, Punjab has not codified the clear and direct relationship between political party and caste. The BSP's early triumph is history, and what little of the party remains is gradually disintegrating through splits and mergers with the SAD and the Congress party, two of the state's major political parties. It is possible to draw the conclusion that pressure politics via caste associations is all that remains of any significance in Punjabi caste politics.

## **The feud around conversions in Punjab**

Very recently, the state of Punjab has seen the two communities- the Christians and the radical Nihang Sikhs—engage in protests and clashes against each other. Following this, the Catholic Church in Punjab was also targeted and damaged by the Nihang Sikhs. Additionally, a Christian program was also interfered with and attacked by the same community. This scenario was viewed as a severely disturbing clash between the two communities. The reason behind this is that the Hindu and Sikh organizations have questioned whether the Christian missionaries are conducting illegitimate conversions through fraud practices that have led to the misguidance of several people. The clashes were taking place against the practices and not the community. They are strongly against the way people are being tricked into believing preachers who claim superficial things. This act of the Christian community is being viewed as theft in the homes of those on the receiving end of it.

Even the chief of Akal Takht, which is the highest Sikh temporal authority, Gyani Harpreet Singh clarified that the poor Sikhs and Hindus, and even those from the OBC, were held as targets by the Christian missionaries. As far as the missionaries are concerned, they have rejected these allegations and claimed that both the Hindu and Sikh communities are responsible for discriminating against them and planning

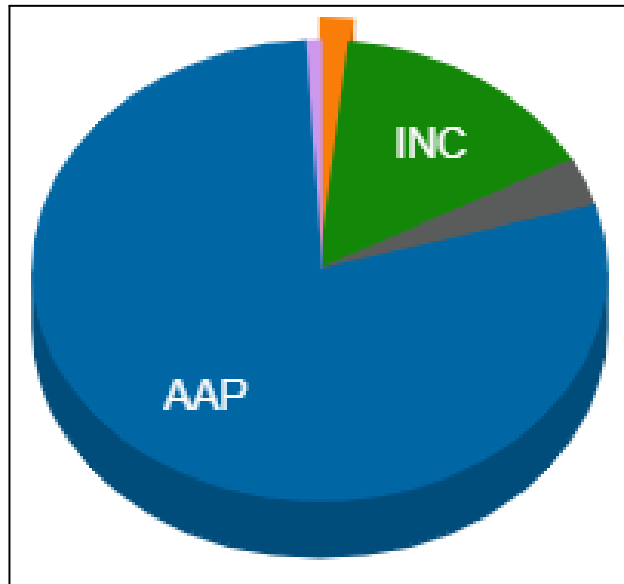
systematic propaganda against them by virtue of the fact that Hindus and Sikhs are relatively in the majority. Christians are accusing the other two communities of portraying them as 'villains' while simultaneously denying all the other allegations against them. Hamid Masih, who is the president of the Punjab Christian Movement, allegedly held the BJP and the RSS responsible for initiating a *hate campaign* against them. Apart from that, there were attacks on the Christian volunteers, churches, and even the gatherings that were reported. According to the reports, there was no strict action taken against those who were involved in these attacks, and so far, there have been no arrests of those who were held responsible.

According to Masih, the community is being targeted, and the police and other authorities are only fueling more tensions between them and the Sikhs and Hindus. As a community, he mentioned that they feel they are being discriminated against and that their voices are being suppressed. If we specifically address the numbers, according to the 2011 census data, the population of the Christian community is relatively small. It accounts for only 1.26 percent of Punjab.

- a) Sikhs- 58 percent
- b) Hindus- 39 percent
- c) Muslims- 1.93 percent
- d) Dalits (Hindus and Sikhs)- 31.9 percent

However, the Christian leaders have claimed that their share of the population is, in reality, 15 percent. This is because various Dalits had earlier converted their religion to Christianity, but on the papers, they continued to show their Dalit identity in order to avail themselves of the benefits associated with the reservation. Additionally, the divide is such that nearly 72 percent of the Sikhs, most of them from the Jat community, reside in the rural state and also own the majority of the land. Dalits, on the other hand, own a very small percentage of the land- 0.72 percent. This ultimately pushes them to work as farm laborers and escalates the dominance of the Sikh community. Christians, on the other hand, have demanded reservations in the job sector for those who are economically weak in their community, but this is not the case in Punjab as of now. Christians are now being held as a community that has a vulnerable position in terms of their identity and rights over others.

## **2022 State Assembly Elections: An Analysis**



Assembly Elections Political Parties Share

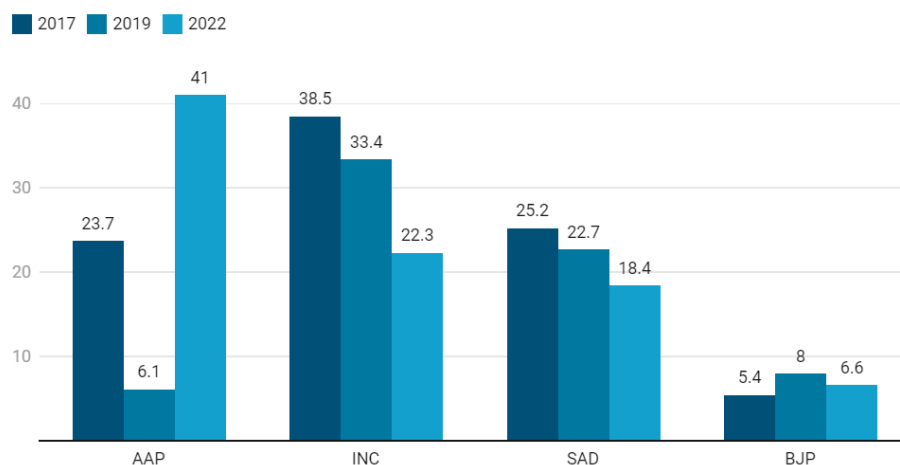
**Image Courtesy** -The Outlook

The state assembly elections of 2022 saw the Badal family leading the Shiromani Akali Dal, and its allies were not actively visible due to the dissent shown towards the farm bills. The Akali Dal and BSP announced an alliance. For Congress, things were relatively simple. The Aam Aadmi Party, on the other hand, won a considerably good share of seats- 92 out of 117. This was not essentially expected of them. The two main issues around the time of the elections in the state were *drugs* and *corruption* in the government. The security breach was another major concern with respect to the state and the law and order situation since there were a lot of lynchings at religious places in the state. The issue of security during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit was also raised by the BJP as a serious concern. As far as the Dalits are concerned, despite the fact that they comprise a considerable share of the population, they are also viewed as valuable voters for all the mainstream political parties.

As a vote bank, their share cannot be overlooked, which is why political parties constantly engage in gathering their support. As mentioned, the majority of chief ministers in Punjab hail from the Jat Sikh community. The Dalit politics in the state saw a change when the BJP promised to select an SC Chief Minister if it were elected. Even the Shiromani Akali Dal was interested in appointing the post of Deputy Chief Minister to a reliable candidate from this community. Congress also followed the same pattern. According to the assembly elections of 2022 in Punjab, the political parties have barely focused on the actual issues pertaining to the landless rural Dalits and the struggles that come along with their caste identity. As a community, Dalits were in demand given the population share they held. After the BJP and the Shiromani Akali Dal underwent a split, the BJP had to enter the assembly elections individually. According to the analysis of these elections, the right-wing nationalism of the BJP wasn't well received by all. Especially if we look at the situation of the post-farm laws, it was tough for the BJP MLAs to even enter their constituencies.

Arun Nagar, for example, a BJP legislator, was shown agitation by the voters. When the party announced its decision to appoint a Dalit Chief Minister when it came to power in 2022, there were various reactions in the political sphere. Looking at the community of Hindu Dalits, they are more inclined towards the Congress. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, for example, it received a good 58 percent of the Hindu Dalit vote; this was a rise from 37 percent in 2012. However, it was observed that the support the Sikh Dalits offered to Congress also witnessed a downfall from 2012 to 2019, but was relatively better than the SAD-BJP alliance. The Dera was also crucial to the Congress's ability to maintain its position in Doaba despite the Aam Aadmi Party wave in the 2022 assembly elections. The Shiromani Akali Dal, the Bahujan Samaj Party, and the BJP each won one of the 23 assembly seats in the area, while the AAP and the Congress each won ten. In the Jalandhar parliamentary seat, the AAP took five of the nine assembly segments, while the Congress took the other three.

In Punjab, voters treat state and general elections differently, as seen by a comparison of assembly segments from the previous three elections. 2019 saw little gain for AAP in Punjab as support remained mostly split among the other three major parties. The contrast is also quite clear in terms of assembly segments. AAP only had the lead in seven segments in 2019, compared to 69 for Congress. In 2019, compared to both state elections, the SAD had a higher yield of assembly seats. The BJP concurred. The rise of AAP as a new political force in Punjab may be seen in the evolution of party performance over time. They have almost doubled their vote share in just two elections, pushing all three big parties to the periphery. The results of the 2022 elections show how the AAP secured its victory. Doaba was the only sub-region where there was close competition between Congress and the AAP. A number of constituencies in Majha, including Dina Nagar, Gurdaspur, Qadian, Dera Baba Nanak, and Fatehgar Churian are still held by the Congress party. Other than that, AAP significantly improved in both Malwa and Majha.



Main Parties' Vote Share in the Last Three Punjab Elections (2017-2022)

Image Courtesy - Scroll

As far as the freebies are concerned, every woman who is at least 18 years old will receive Rs 1000 per month from the Aam Aadmi Party, and any woman with a blue card will receive Rs 2,000, according to the



Shiromani Akali Dal. Freebies are continuously used as a tool to influence voters and ensure victory in elections. Apart from this, 300 units of free electricity to each household, an increase in the old age pension to Rs 2,500 per month, the abolishment of property tax, and 600 Mohalla clinics to be opened to provide free treatment were also promised. As per a rough estimate, these freebies would cost the state exchequer around Rs 50,000–60,000 crore annually. Additionally, the party put forth Bhagwant Mann as its Chief Minister, who also belongs to the dominant community of the Jat Sikhs. Even though the Dalit community has a larger population share, the dominance of the Jats overrides that of Dalits, and this could also be seen in the win of Bhagwant Mann.

Moving forward, the Bhartiya Janata Party believes that this is a new beginning for them in the state, even though all parties have begun reflecting on how and why they lost the fight to the Punjab Assembly. They said that because of the saffron party's previous partnership with the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and the farmers' movement, they had been unable to engage in any political action in Punjab for about eighteen months. Across Punjab, there are several voters in support of the BJP. The BJP's ascent in Punjab is one of the less examined tales of this election, from a party written off in the state during the farmers' protest to now making its mark in places it hadn't contested in almost thirty years. This is because, despite the fact that the party's triumph may not be immediately apparent in terms of seats when the results are in, the BJP has established the foundation for future expansion in the state. The party may have been severely affected by the protests against the farm laws; however, its decline was primarily initiated by the fact that they contested without the alliance after years. This does not mean that the party does not have any further chances of winning.

In Punjab, the elections saw changes in political loyalty in around 63% of the seats. There are 47 of these seats, most of which are situated in the politically significant Malwa area. Additionally, it is more common for a specific social group to dominate a constituency and change allegiance between elections. The majority of the assembly constituencies with a Sikh majority comprise 25 of the 74 swing seats. Dalits make up over thirty percent of the electorate in over half of the swing seats. The work advances the election hypothesis, which holds that widespread social groups seldom cast bulk ballots. The group's voting choices become increasingly divided as it grows in size. In the last four elections, the majority of Dalit votes have gone to Congress.<sup>17</sup> Between 2012 and 2019, the Congress lost support from Sikh Dalits, despite its popularity among Hindu Dalits continuing to rise.

## **Jalandhar Bypoll Elections**

The elections were a result of the unforeseen demise of Congress MP Santokh Singh Chaudhary. The Aam Aadmi Party was successfully able to gain a considerably good vote share, with a whopping 58,000 votes.

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<sup>17</sup> Lokniti-CSDS survey data

Sushil Kumar Rinku, who was a Congress MLA from Jalandhar West constituency in the previous assembly, later changed his party to the AAP. He defeated Congress's Karamjit Kaur, who was a rival. The Aam Aadmi Party was therefore successful in beginning its journey in the Lok Sabha once again. Furthermore, the current Chief Minister, Bhagwant Mann, who was the Aam Aadmi Party's first Lok Sabha MP, then resigned from the lower house after he was elected as an MLA in the state assembly elections. Arvind Kejriwal credited the unprecedented victory to the contributions of the government in Punjab, specifically Bhagwant Mann. These are the vote shares of the political parties in these elections-

- a) Indian National Congress- 2,43,450
- b) Aam Aadmi Party- 3,02,097 votes
- c) Akali-BSP- 1,58,354
- d) BJP- 1,34,706

As far as the BJP is concerned, it put forth Inder Iqbal Singh Atwal- a dalit sikh who was earlier a part of the Shiromani Akali Dal but quit a while later. Since its defeat in the Sangrur byelections last year, the AAP hasn't had a representative in the Lower House of Parliament. On May 10, by-elections were conducted in Jalandhar. A 54.70% voter turnout was observed. It was significantly lower than the 63.04 percent seen in the Lok Sabha elections in 2019. The byelection is also being seen as a test of how well the Bhagwant Mann-led government has performed in its first year in office. This government has been promoting its initiatives to offer free electricity and jobs to young people, regularize the services of temporary workers, take action against corruption, and open mohalla clinics, among other things. On the other hand, the Congress wants to keep Jalandhar, which has been a longstanding stronghold for the party and where it hasn't lost an election since 1999. Since the Bharatiya Janata Party and the SAD lost the assembly election, the stakes are also very high for them. The reason why AAP achieved this victory is that Harpal Cheema, the Dalit candidate for finance minister, and Sandeep Pathak, the organization's general secretary, meticulously managed the AAP campaign by making extensive use of their cadres and resources to make sure that no area of the seat was overlooked.

Additionally, almost 50 days went by throughout the campaign. This gave the government plenty of time to fix the party's organizational problems while simultaneously ensuring the smooth implementation of welfare programs on the ground. Even though the AAP secured its victory in the elections, it cannot be overlooked that there was a *hidden winner* this time, and that is the Bhartiya Janata Party. Two Assembly districts, Jalandhar Central and Jalandhar North, were won by the BJP. Both are entirely urban districts with a majority of Upper Caste Hindu voters. Both seats are held presently by the Congress. With a 15% vote share, the BJP finished fourth overall, trailing only the AAP, Congress, and Akali Dal. But for the BJP, being the leading party in two Congress-held districts is encouraging and might indicate a change in Hindu voters. The SAD leaders heavily emphasized Dalit issues in their campaign for the Jalandhar byelection while attempting to discredit Congress and the AAP. The party has also formed an alliance with the BSP, which primarily identifies with Dalit politics, but they have neglected to mention its very significant and historical role in advancing the cause of Punjab's Dalits.

With a 34.05% vote share, AAP seized the Congress' Jalandhar Lok Sabha seat. On the whole, since 1999, this has been one of the safest congressional districts. Even before that, it had long been a Congress stronghold, and between 1989 and 1998, the party only lost it twice, both times to Inder Kumar Gujral, then-leader of the Janata Dal and ultimately prime minister. In spite of criticism over its handling of the law and order situation and meddling in Punjab by the Delhi high command, the current AAP government's success in Jalandhar suggests that the party's path ahead of the forthcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections is promising. After losing the Sangrur by-election in May 2022, AAP found it difficult to advance in parliament. The Jalandhar by-election loss for the Congress is significant since the party not only lost its loyal Dalit voter base but also one of its safest seats. Instead of relying on established and well-known figures that the public has ignored, Congress will need to reevaluate its approach and give fresh faces a chance.

It was also observed that Charanjit Singh Channi's efforts played a significant role in the number of votes Congress received. Channi began visiting every Dalit dera, event, and religious leader in Jalandhar in March, which enabled some Dalit pockets to increase their voter turnout. Ironically, the Congress was the first to declare Karamjit Kaur Chaudhary's candidacy in March, hoping for a sympathy wave. However, the AAP altered the election's dynamics by enlisting former Congress MLA Sushil Kumar Rinku. The hopes of the Congress were also hurt by a weak campaign in comparison to the AAP and the BJP and a lack of unity among the local Dalit leaders. AAP announced the plan to provide 300 units of free power to the people of Punjab in the first year of its administration, which undoubtedly gave them a push. This was one of its key election promises that it fulfilled. People can now save the amount they used to pay electricity bills, which ranged from Rs 3,000 to Rs 8,000 in the past. Its benefits were the opening of 500 mohalla clinics and the creation of 29,000 government jobs, both of which the AAP government had pledged. In Jalandhar, voters placed their personal interests ahead of any compassion for either former chief minister Parkash Singh Badal or ex-MP Santokh Chaudhary.

The entire election narrative was altered by the AAP's decision to extend the free power program to around 80% of the people in Punjab. Additionally, they found success with CM Bhagwant Mann's advice to give them just 11 months to perform in Jalandhar. With this victory, AAP's performance in the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections is projected to increase. Another element that gave the AAP an advantage over other parties was its vigorous campaign, which included back-to-back rallies and road shows headed by AAP leaders Arvind Kejriwal and Bhagwant Mann. Priyanka Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi were absent from the Congress campaign, which was run by senior Punjab leaders as opposed to the AAP's team of top leaders. As for the Congress, it was already in decline in Punjab after the 2022 assembly elections. But losing the Jalandhar byelection just eight months before the elections in 2024 is a significant setback for the party. During the Punjab assembly election, the only areas where the Congress had any chance of surviving were the Doaba and Malwa regions. However, the Congress has lost not only its sway in Doaba as a result of the Jalandhar defeat but also its vital Dalit voter base.

## **Social Divisions in Punjab Politics**

In the period after 1966, in Punjab, there was a change in the sociological origin of the Akali during the Punjabi Suba Movement. Until 1962, the Akali leadership mainly came from urban upper-caste middle-class Sikhs while the majority of the Sikhs resided in the rural areas of the state. The structure of Akali Dal's leadership underwent changes with the Green Revolution and economic empowerment. The democratic structures within the state also deepened over a period of time. The Sikh and the Akali leadership, have both been dominated by the Jat Sikhs, they also happened to be numerically a very strong community. There have been divisions within the community as well, majorly because of the rapid mobilization, economic development, party competition, and factionalism. People of the community have been divided in terms of their political choices. As far as the Congress is concerned, they do, however, have good support among the community just as the Akali Dal. The Jat Sikhs have numerically been dominant. Furthermore, this dominance has affected the political role of the other castes among the Sikhs. Khattris, Aroras, Alhuwalias, Takhans, Ramgarhias or the Rais and the Lohars, to name a few, are among the many other castes that have been affected in terms of their political representation due to the Jat Sikhs and this has led to further divisions among the Sikh community. As a religion, historically, Sikhism never held caste important, however, despite the beliefs, the class divisions between the land-owning Jats and the landless Tarkhans and the Dalits who work as tenants have been the major reason for the social divide in the community.

The Mazhabi Sikhs and other members of the Sikh- castes have developed new religious identities and religions that reflect the institutionalized Sikh religious organizations, but they have also developed distinctive cultures of deprivation of their own. Election politics have shown that the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has come in third place behind the Congress and the Shiromani Akali Dal. Nevertheless, the BSP has failed to establish itself as a legitimate political entity in Punjab. Even though they are the main players in Punjabi politics, the Akali party has never shied away from seeking political alliances. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the Akali Dal has been recognized predominantly as a Sikh party, particularly supporting the rural Jat Sikh landed peasants, due to its involvement in the gurdwara reform movement and the Punjabi Suba movement. The Sikh community is split along class and regional lines, and it is not a homogeneous group made up of several castes. After the Green Revolution, these disparities have gotten worse over time. Third, because a sizable portion of the Sikh community has historically supported Congress, there are similarly pronounced political and ideological divides within the group.

## **The Aam Aadmi Party and its Role in Punjab Politics**

In Punjab's electoral politics, the Aam Aadmi Party continues to be a significant factor despite grave organizational and political errors. It lacks both the popular leader Amarinder Singh of the Congress and

the organizational network of the Akali Dal. However, because of its rise in the state, the question of regional versus Delhi-centric control over political party decisions has gained attention. In Punjab's political landscape, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), a third major participant, entered during the 2014 general elections, joining the previous two main contenders, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and Indian National Congress (henceforth, the Congress). Out of the 13 Lok Sabha seats it ran for from Punjab, the AAP won four of them. In addition to losing every seat it ran for across the nation, 414 of the 434 candidates it recruited lost their security deposits.

Being the motherland of the Sikh people is one feature of Punjab that sets it apart from all other states. The only state where Sikhs make up the majority is Punjab. They make up over 58% of Punjab's population but only 1.7% of all of India. Approximately 77% of the Sikh population in India resides in Punjab, whereas they are just marginally present in most other states. The majority position of Sikhs in Punjab is a relatively new development, having emerged only after the linguistic restructuring of Punjab's territory on November 1, 1966. There is ongoing political friction and strife between Punjab, where the Sikh majority resides, and India, where the Hindu majority resides, due to the Sikh minority's dual location. An essential understanding of the distinction between Punjab's election tendencies and those of the majority of other states may be gained from this duality. This dialectic is aptly demonstrated by the fact that the Narendra Modi wave did not materialize in Punjab during the 2014 general election, while being widely acknowledged as having a significant impact in other states, particularly in north and west India.

Even in instances where there is a convergence of electoral trends in Punjab and across India, such as the rise of regional parties and their electoral success in the 1967 assembly elections in numerous states, or the anti-Congress sentiment in the post-emergency general election, this convergence is reflected in Punjab's unique regional identity. The SAD's overwhelming electoral victories in both the 1967 assembly elections and the 1977 general election following the emergency demonstrate Punjab's regional specificity. To date, SAD has acted as practically the only voice for Punjab's regional interests and the political aspirations of the Sikh community. With the advent of political upheaval brought forth by the AAP rise in Punjab, this political monopoly of SAD is being called into question.

In the 2014 general elections, Punjab saw AAP pull off a surprising electoral victory. In stark contrast, its candidates in the rest of India were defeated in every seat they ran for. The fact that Punjab is the only Sikh-majority state in India helps to explain the AAP's exceptional electoral performance there. State terrorism brutally defeated two Sikh-led movements in Punjab that had significant support from the Sikh community: the Maoist/Naxalite movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the Sikh militant movement against the Indian state in the 1980s and 1990s. Large segments of the Sikh community were left feeling betrayed and humiliated by the suppression of these two movements, and they also found themselves without a place in any of the political organizations that were already in existence. Sections of the Sikh populace who had been left disgruntled by the suppression of these two movements found new life when the AAP entered the political arena. With ties to the Sikh and Naxalite militant organizations, these politically revitalized people and groups served as eager operatives for the AAP's election machine in

Punjab. No other political party had been successful in attracting this many activists, particularly from the younger age, to join them.

The emergence of open conflict between the Punjab-based leadership and the Delhi-based central leadership between 2014 and 2017 exacerbated an already-existing contradiction in the AAP's organizational structure regarding the need for politically responsive politics and a centrally controlled organizational arrangement. This conflict, in a way, is not specific to Punjab. The fact that all of India's main political parties are centralized contributes to the growth of state-based regional parties throughout the country, particularly in the non-Hindi-speaking regions. In Punjab, the Akali Dal is a symbol of this shift in politics towards regional issues. However, because of its close ties to the Hindu nationalist BJP, the Akali Dal was unable to legally assert that it represented Punjab's regional concerns in the same manner that regional parties from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Odisha, and Telangana had. Because of the Akali Dal's political weakness, the AAP was able to assert that it stood up for Punjab's interests, particularly those of the Sikh community. This argument has been challenged by the upheaval within Punjab's AAP branch, where Punjab-based leadership is being undermined by non-Punjabi leadership in the central organizational set-up in Delhi. The fact that Haryana-born leaders were in charge of the Delhi central party apparatus further undermined it. The AAP's assertion that it is speaking for Punjab's interests is further weakened by the numerous interstate disputes that exist between Punjab and Haryana.

## **Punjab and the 2024 Elections**

The BJP is now looking forward to ensuring its third victory in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, for which it is focusing on the 13 seats in Punjab and will potentially contest all the seats by itself. The party's leadership is aimed at popularizing the Bhartiya Janata Party's pro-Sikh decisions. Sarchand Singh, a former Taksali leader, recently joined the BJP. According to him, the party will contest all 13 seats, with 10 new seats from Punjab. When the party was in alliance with the Shiromani Akali Dal, it contested three main seats—*Amritsar*, *Gurdaspur*, and *Hoshiarpur*. The BJP leader, Avtar Singh, laid emphasis on the fact that the pro-Sikh decisions made by the party helped specifically when it came to religious issues. As far as the party of Shiromani Akali Dal is concerned, analysts believe that they no longer have the support they had previously given their recent performances, which were not so impressive, and even their performance in the Sangrur Byelection. Even the BJP think tanks have been actively bringing forth new political talent. Additionally, the party is also planning to reopen the Kartapur Corridor to reach out to Sikh voters.

The sources who are a part of the party's Lok Sabha Pravas Yojana also claimed that there are potentially 144 weak Lok Sabha seats that will also be taken into specific consideration for the 2024 elections. Among these seats, it's important to note that even the seats in Punjab are inclusive. According to Sarchand, the party must work towards winning against the traditional political parties such as the Akali Dal and the Aam Aadmi Party, given that these two have reportedly secured their positions among the religious and caste

communities solely on the basis of cultural identities. Sikhs, being in the majority, need to be convinced in order to enhance the hold of the BJP in the state. The situation is slightly more sensitive, however, given the farm laws that were actively protested against.

As far as the BJP is concerned, according to Union Home Minister Amit Shah, it will be a major player in Punjabi politics and will win the most votes there in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. He was speaking to district presidents, officeholders, and core group members of the state BJP. Furthermore, Amit Shah also addressed how the people of Punjab have sacrificed so much in order to protect their religious identity and their individual as well as community rights. *"I want to assure the people of Punjab that the Centre and the country stand with every citizen of Punjab, and this crisis situation in Punjab will not be allowed to worsen,"* he said.

Home Minister Amit Shah also criticized the Punjab's Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) administration, claiming that in barely three months, *"deceit and deception have been exposed" in its face*. Shah reassured the members of his party that the BJP will get the most votes in the Lok Sabha elections of 2024 because voters are *"dissatisfied"* with the AAP and want to get rid of them in the upcoming elections. This would be the first time that the party would be entering the electoral politics of Punjab, along with a history of backlash that it faced during the farm laws agitation, which ultimately were repealed. Additionally, the Punjab BJP Chief, Sunil Kumar Jakhar, confirmed that the interests of the state will be safeguarded by the party and that no one shall be permitted to disrupt them. For every three constituencies, the state's nine Lok Sabha seats have been assigned to union ministers. Punjab BJP general secretary Subhash Sharma said that through this program, the party is set to strengthen its base like never before.

The party has currently targeted nine Lok Sabha seats where it believes it has a good chance of growing its base. Three clusters of seats have been established here. Anandpur Sahib, Hoshiarpur, and Bathinda seats will be under the supervision of Union Jal Shakti Minister Gajendra Shekhawat, while Amritsar, Jalandhar, and Gurdaspur seats will be under the control of Union Minister of State for External Affairs Arjun Meghwal. Union health minister Mansukh Mandaviya has been asked to strengthen the party base in Patiala, Sangrur, and Ludhiana. These ministers will try to improve the cadre and party support in Punjab, where the party previously only ran candidates on three seats out of a total of 13 Lok Sabha seats. The Union ministers have been required to give monthly status updates to the party leader, NP Nadda, and will interact with local residents and business owners.

On the other hand, the way from the Aam Aadmi Party to Punjab's 13 Lok Sabha seats in 2024 starts in Jalandhar. The Congress's streak of dominance in the Dalit stronghold since 1999 came to an end on Saturday when the AAP took the seat from them in the Lok Sabha district of Jalandhar. Sushil Kumar Rinku defeated Congresswoman Karamjit Kaur, the spouse of two-term MP Santokh Singh Chaudhary, whose passing had forced the byelection, by a margin of 58,691 votes. Sushil Kumar Rinku left the Congress and joined the AAP prior to the byelection. Punjab, as a state, is highly diverse. It has also seen several religious conflicts, and adding to that is the history of its reorganization. Political parties are keen to

play the caste card, given that people hold their religious and caste identities very close. However, this is not the case with every election. Merely on the basis of caste, and the vague schemes or freebies directed at minorities will no longer award the parties with strong support and vote share.

## **Conclusion**

Punjab, a state with the highest Dalit population and dominant Jat Sikhs has voted either for Congress or NDA (Akali Dal and BJP) till 2022. Prior to 2022, Jat Sikhs majorly voted for the Akalis because of their hold over SGPC and Panthic image whereas Brahmins and Baniyas majorly voted for BJP and Congress. The Hindu vote basically used to split between the BJP and the INC. The community of Jat Sikhs being dominant in Punjab started giving their share of votes to Akali Dal. Akali Dal formed an alliance with the Bhartiya Janata Party to garner Hindu votes. Congress, on the other hand, was popularly voted for by Muslims, Christians, Dalits, and moderate Sikhs. The conversion of the Dalit Sikhs and even the Dalit Hindus- especially the Valmiki community into Christians also played an important role, as the vote bank of the converted Christians was also largely a benefit to the Congress. This was noticed in the elections of 2017. Dera politics, on the other hand, in the late 2000s also played a significant role as they had control over the Dalits, the backward-class Sikhs, and the Hindus. Even though the caste situation in rural Punjab is changing, it is difficult to conclude with certainty that the shift in profession is directly responsible for political assertion. Education and changes in the workforce have undoubtedly altered the caste structure, but this transformation may not have directly led to the dalit allegation. Not all castes have seen a consistent improvement in their living standards, but not all economic transformations are accompanied by political mobilization. Consequently, a significant change in party politics is not indicative of the political ramifications of Punjab's shifting caste system. The direction of change is not towards a society that is inclusive. All trends point to the formation of exclusive caste groupings, with the exception of the Sikhs' doctrinal commitment to the equality of worship. Development is moving in the direction of less intercaste boundary dissolution and a sharp reduction in the forces upholding hierarchy.

It can be understood that the state of Punjab is diverse in terms of its castes and religions. Even within the castes, there are further divisions and different preferences when it comes to political parties, and as far as these parties are concerned, they also play the caste card to win any election or secure power, which is a successful strategy given that people in India hold their cultural identities very close and even more seriously when they are at stake or in a vulnerable position. In Punjab, for example, the dalit population holds a considerably impressive share; however, this does not mean that their representation in politics is equivalent. Merely on the basis of the schemes and programs, the government cannot win support from these communities, as they are aware of the pattern followed with respect to caste politics. Even in the coming years, the strategy won't lose its essence since caste identities need to be secured and people specifically connect with the leaders who are able to do so; however, the government needs to strike the right balance between that and the fact that only those strategies will work, which ultimately result in aggregate development and provide necessary conditions for the people to prosper.



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