

# Shiromani Akali Dal: Past And Present

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## Table of Contents

I. Introduction	1
II. Electoral Performance of SAD	2
III. Pre-Independence History of the Shiromani Akali Dal	3
IV. Punjabi Subah Movement	4
V. Anandpur Sahib Resolution	7
VI. Dharma Yudh Morcha	9
VII. Operation Blue Star	10
A. Build-Up to the Operation	10
B. The Operation	11
VIII. Aftermath of Operation Blue Star	11
IX. Political Dominance of Shiromani Akali Dal and BJP Alliance in Punjab (1997–2017)	12
X. Recent Electoral Decline of SAD	13
XI. Prominent Leaders of SAD	16
A. Master Tara Singh	16
B. Sant Fateh Singh	18
C. Harchand Singh Longowal	19
D. Surjit Singh Barnala	21
E. Parkash Singh Badal	22
XII. Conclusion	24
XIII. References	26

## I. Introduction

The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) is a regional political party in Punjab, India, known for its commitment to serving the Sikh community. Founded on December 14, 1920, SAD focuses on promoting the well-being of Sikhs by providing them with both a political and a religious platform. The party has its headquarters at Block #6, Madhya Marg, Sector 28, Chandigarh, and publishes its official newspaper, Akali Awaaz. While its influence is rooted in Punjab, the SAD also plays an active role in national politics, particularly in New Delhi.

The origins of the present-day SAD can be traced back to the Akali movement of the early 1920s. This movement was instrumental in securing Sikh control over gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship) through the Sikh Gurdwara Act of 1925, marking a significant victory for the community under British rule. Over the years, SAD has maintained control over key Sikh religious bodies such as the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) and the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee.

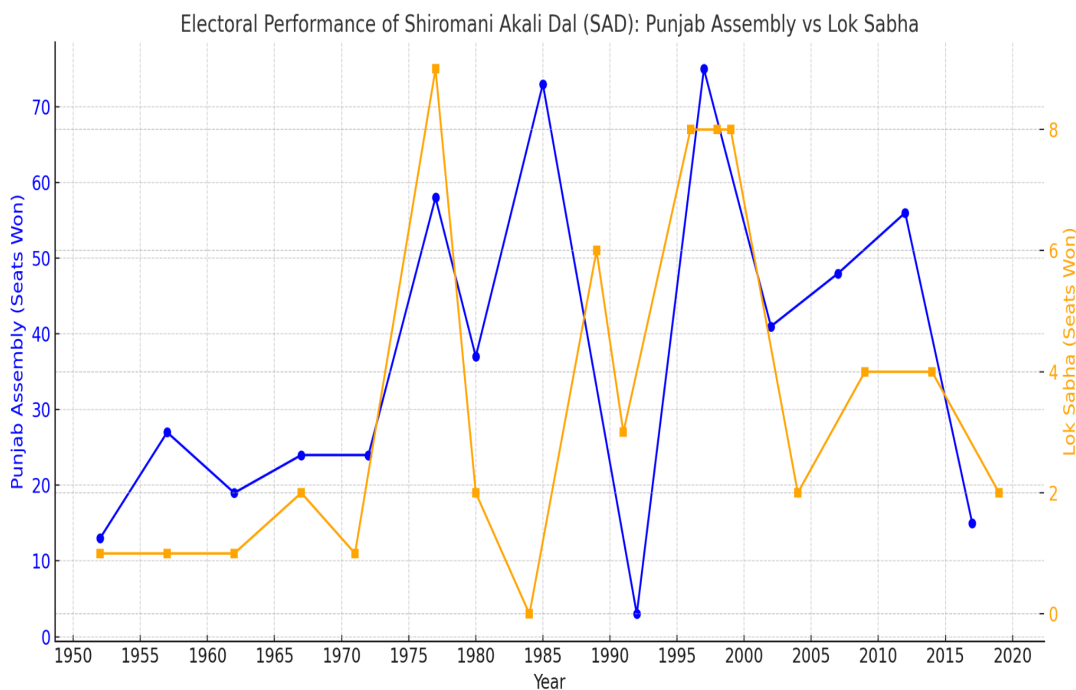
SAD also operates various wings to address the needs of different sections of society, including the Youth Akali Dal, Istri Akali Dal (women's wing), the Shiromani Akali Dal SC Wing (labor wing), and the Shiromani Akali Dal BC Wing (peasant's wing). The party's student wing is the Student Organisation of India. Ideologically, SAD adheres to conservatism, Punjabi nationalism, Punjabiyaat, and federalism, and its political position ranges from center-right to right-wing.

## II. Electoral Performance of SAD

The chart illustrates the electoral performance of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) in Punjab's Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha elections from 1952 to 2019.

In the Punjab Assembly elections (blue line), SAD experienced significant victories in 1977, 1985, and 1997, securing a majority in these years. However, its performance has been inconsistent, with sharp declines in 1992 (boycott) and 2017.

In the Lok Sabha elections (orange line), SAD's performance has remained modest, with peaks in 1977 and the late 1990s to early 2000s, coinciding with its alliance with the BJP. The party's influence in national elections has been more limited compared to state elections, reflecting its primarily regional focus.



Source: ECI

### III. Pre-Independence History of the Shiromani Akali Dal

The pre-independence history of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) is deeply intertwined with the Sikh community's efforts for religious reform and political representation. The Singh Sabha Movement (1873–1920s) emerged as a religious reform movement to revive Sikhism from the decline it faced due to the growing influence of Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, as well as internal distortions like caste discrimination and idol worship. It aimed to restore Sikhism to its original principles based on Guru Granth Sahib by promoting education, publishing Sikh literature, and establishing schools and colleges like Khalsa College, Amritsar. This movement not only redefined Sikh identity but also created a politically aware and reform-minded Sikh community. The Singh Sabha Movement laid the groundwork for the Akali Movement by instilling a sense of unity, inspiring leaders, and fostering a commitment to reform. Its emphasis on distinct Sikh identity and community mobilization provided the ideological and organizational foundation for the Akali Movement's efforts to liberate gurdwaras from corrupt mahants, reclaim Sikh institutions, and assert autonomy during colonial rule. The roots of SAD can be traced back to the formation of the Central Sikh League in March 1919 in Lahore by Sikh leaders of the Singh Sabha. The league aimed to reclaim control of Sikh institutions, such as Khalsa College in Amritsar, and to liberate gurdwaras from corrupt mahants (priests). It also supported the Indian independence movement and lent its backing to the non-cooperation movement initiated by Mahatma Gandhi later that year.

The urgency to reform Sikh religious institutions intensified after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in April 1919 and the subsequent controversial support extended by Arur Singh Shergill, the then head priest of the Golden Temple, to General Dyer. This sparked widespread resentment among Sikhs, who sought to wrest control of their sacred spaces from government influence. In October 1920, the Central Sikh League organized efforts to take over the Golden Temple and Akal Takht, furthering the push for Sikh autonomy in religious matters.

In November 1920, under public pressure, a managing committee of 175 members was established to oversee all gurdwaras, replacing the earlier government-backed committee dominated by Sikh landed aristocrats. This new body was formally named the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) in December 1920. Around the same time, the Akali Dal was formed as the political wing of the SGPC, tasked with coordinating volunteer groups (Akali jathas) to liberate Sikh gurdwaras from corrupt mahants. The Akali Dal derived its name from the term "Akali," meaning "timeless" or "immortal," a reference to a Khalsa militant order established during the time of Guru Gobind Singh.

The Akali movement, also known as the Gurdwara Reform Movement, gained momentum between 1920 and 1925. It played a key role in the introduction of the Sikh Gurdwara Act of 1925, which successfully transferred control of historical Sikh shrines in India to the SGPC. This period also saw the launch of 30 new Punjabi newspapers to amplify the movement's objectives and spread awareness.

Politically, the Akali Dal participated in the 1937 provincial elections following the Government of India Act of 1935. It won 10 seats but remained in opposition, occasionally engaging with other parties like the Muslim League, though no alliances materialized. In the 1940s, relations between the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) deteriorated due to differing political objectives and strategies. The INC's emphasis on a unified, secular India often clashed with SAD's focus on Sikh identity and autonomy. This divergence led SAD to seek alliances that would better support its goals. Maharaja Yadavindra Singh of Patiala, who ascended the throne in 1938, became a significant figure in this context. As the Chancellor of the Chamber of Princes from 1943 to 1944, he played a pivotal role in persuading princely states to join the Indian Union. His leadership and influence made him an attractive ally for SAD, which was striving to safeguard Sikh interests during the tumultuous period leading up to India's independence. Consequently, SAD's collaboration with leaders like Maharaja Yadavindra Singh marked a strategic shift aimed at ensuring political leverage and protection for Sikh identity in the emerging Indian polity.

In the 1946 elections, the Akali Dal secured 22 seats and joined a coalition government led by the Unionist Khizar Hayat Khan Tiwana alongside the Indian National Congress. During this time, the Akalis also strongly opposed the partition of India, fearing it would lead to persecution of Sikhs in a divided Punjab.

Throughout the pre-independence period, the Akali Dal was an active participant in the Indian freedom struggle. It supported various civil disobedience movements and aligned itself with broader nationalist objectives while maintaining its primary focus on protecting the rights and interests of the Sikh community.

#### IV. Punjabi Subah Movement

After independence, the Akali Dal sought to create a Sikh state. However, this idea lacked widespread appeal, even among many Sikhs. Aligning with the broader national demand for linguistic state reorganization, the Akalis shifted their focus from religion to language. The Punjabi Suba Movement, launched in the 1950s, aimed at carving out a Punjabi-speaking province (suba) from the erstwhile East Punjab state. The Akali Dal's demands were straightforward:

1. Creation of a Punjabi-speaking state, including all Punjabi-speaking areas, without artificial manipulation of boundaries.
2. Recognition of this state as a legitimate political unit under the Indian Constitution.

In 1957, Chief Minister Bhim Sen Sachar's decision to declare both Hindi and Punjabi as the official languages of Punjab further galvanized the morcha (movement) for Punjabi Suba. However, the rejection of this demand by the States Reorganisation Commission dealt a significant blow to the Akali cause. The commission argued that Punjabi was not distinct enough from Hindi to warrant a separate

state, a stance that the Akali Dal condemned as discriminatory, emphasizing that all 14 recognized official languages had been granted their own states.

To intensify their efforts, Akali leaders Sant Fateh Singh and Master Tara Singh undertook prolonged hunger strikes to rally support. Sant Fateh Singh fasted for 22 days in late 1960, while Master Tara Singh went on a 48-day hunger strike starting August 15, 1961. Despite their sacrifices and the imprisonment of approximately 57,000 Akali activists during the agitation, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru refused to concede to their demands.

The movement faced significant resistance from groups that demanded the idea of a unified “Maha Punjab,” which would include both Punjabi-speaking and non-Punjabi-speaking areas. The issue polarized the region, with pro-Punjabi Suba factions raising slogans like Punjabi Suba Amar Rahe (Long Live Punjabi Suba), while opponents countered with Maha Punjab Zindabad (Long Live Maha Punjab). Fearing unrest, the government banned these slogans in April 1955 under Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC). This action intensified tensions, as it was seen as an attempt to suppress the legitimate aspirations of Punjabi speakers.

The ban on slogans marked the beginning of large-scale protests. Master Tara Singh, a senior Akali leader, organized a protest march on May 10, 1955, to defy the restrictions. He was subsequently arrested, triggering widespread agitations across the region. The movement grew into a long-drawn struggle, with the Akalis taking the lead in mobilizing public support. During this period, the Akalis emphasized their commitment to achieving a Punjabi-speaking state through constitutional means. Despite facing political repression, arrests, and internal challenges, they maintained the momentum of the agitation.

The movement finally achieved a breakthrough with the passage of the Punjab Reorganization Act of 1966, which was based on the recommendations of the States Reorganization Commission. Key outcomes of this act included:

1. Creation of Punjab: A Punjabi-speaking majority state.
2. Formation of Haryana: A Hindi-speaking state for the Haryanvi-speaking population.
3. Union Territory of Chandigarh: Made the shared capital of both Punjab and Haryana.
4. Transfer of Pahari-speaking Areas to Himachal Pradesh: Regions such as Kangra and other hill areas were merged with Himachal Pradesh, which was then a Union Territory.

While the Akali Dal initially celebrated the creation of Punjabi Suba, they were dissatisfied with what they perceived as a “truncated state” that did not fully meet their demands. After the formation of Punjabi Suba, unresolved issues such as the control of Chandigarh and the exclusion of other Punjabi-speaking areas led to fresh agitations. The Akalis considered this a betrayal by the Congress, which had backed out of promises made to the Sikh community before Partition.

Sant Fateh Singh, a prominent Akali leader, took charge of the movement to secure Chandigarh and other Punjabi-speaking areas for Punjab. He went on a hunger strike and threatened self-immolation to pressure the central government. Despite assurances from Hukam Singh, a respected Sikh leader and Speaker of the Lok Sabha, that Chandigarh would be transferred to Punjab and a committee would address the issue of Punjabi-speaking areas, these promises were not fulfilled. On December 27, 1966, just an hour before his planned immolation, Sant Fateh Singh ended his fast on Hukam Singh's persuasion, breaking the sanctity of the ardas (Sikh prayer).

The unfulfilled promises disillusioned many within the Akali Dal. However, Darshan Singh Pheruman, a devout Sikh with a background in both the Akali Dal and the Congress, renewed the sanctity of the struggle. Like Bhai Lachhman Singh, who had attained martyrdom during the liberation of Nankana Sahib, Pheruman undertook a fast unto death in 1969 to demand the fulfillment of promises made to Punjab. Despite appeals from then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, he refused to yield and attained martyrdom on the 74th day of his fast. In a letter to Indira Gandhi, he clarified that his ardas was not intended to exert pressure but was a sincere expression of his faith. Despite the sacrifices and the partial success of the Punjabi Suba Movement, the grievances of Punjab remain unresolved:

1. Chandigarh: Despite assurances, Chandigarh was never transferred to Punjab and remains a Union Territory shared with Haryana.
2. Punjabi-speaking Areas: Several Punjabi-speaking regions were not included in Punjab during the reorganization, a point of contention to this day.
3. Water Resources: Control over critical water infrastructure, including the Bhakra and other dams, remains with the Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB), rather than the Punjab government.

For over five decades, Punjab has remained without its own exclusive capital, and the Akali Dal has continued to perceive this as a betrayal of Sikh aspirations.

## V. Anandpur Sahib Resolution

In 1973, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) drafted the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, a document that articulated their political and cultural demands. The resolution sought greater autonomy for the state of Punjab within the Indian Union, emphasizing devolution of power from the central government to the states. It demanded the recognition of Sikhism as a religion distinct from Hinduism and proposed granting Punjab the right to frame its own internal constitution.

The resolution also sought the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, readjustment of boundaries to include Punjabi-speaking areas from neighboring states, and more control over river water resources for irrigation. While the SAD insisted that the resolution did not call for secession from India, the central government, led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, viewed it with suspicion, interpreting its proposals as a threat to national unity.

In 1978, the Akali Dal revised the resolution to focus more on state autonomy and economic issues rather than solely on religious matters. Leaders like Gurcharan Singh Tohra argued that strong states would not weaken the Indian federation but rather promote growth. Despite this, negotiations between the Akalis and the central government failed to reach a resolution.

Specifically, following 12 resolutions were put forward by the Akali Dal:

#### Resolution No. 1

Moved by Sardar Gurcharan Singh Tohra, the resolution emphasizes redefining India's constitutional framework to establish genuine federalism. It highlights the need for decentralization of power to safeguard the rights of minorities and ensure states play a significant role in governance, progress, and prosperity. This aligns with the Akali Dal's long-standing advocacy for state autonomy, particularly in response to the centralization witnessed during the Emergency (1975).

#### Resolution No. 2

The Akali Dal calls for immediate action on key issues concerning Punjab's territorial and water rights, including:

1. Transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab.
2. Merger of Punjabi-speaking areas into Punjab.
3. Retention of control over headworks by Punjab.
4. Revision of Ravi-Beas water distribution.
5. Maintenance of Sikh representation in the Army.
6. It also highlights land reforms impacting Sikh settlers in Uttar Pradesh.

#### Resolution No. 3

The resolution outlines an economic vision inspired by Sikh principles of dignity of labor and equitable wealth distribution. Key priorities include:

1. Eliminating unemployment within a decade.
2. Tax reforms to shift the burden to wealthier classes.
3. Developing Punjab into a leading economic state with a growth rate of 7% annually.
4. Advocating for industrial and agricultural advancements, including mechanization and fair pricing for produce.
5. The demand for a stock exchange in Ludhiana and a dry port at Amritsar reflects its focus on industrial growth and global connectivity.

#### Resolution No. 4

The Akali Dal demands the implementation of the Nehru Language Formula, granting Punjabi "second language" status in neighboring states with significant Punjabi-speaking populations.



#### Resolution No. 5

The Akali Dal urges the government to address the long-standing rehabilitation issues of refugees in Jammu and Kashmir, even if it necessitates amending Section 370 of the Constitution.

#### Resolution No. 6

This resolution highlights the discrimination faced by minorities and demands fair representation in government services and legislatures, ensuring justice for Sikhs in other states.

#### Resolution No. 7

The Akali Dal calls for abolishing excise duties on tractors to make mechanization affordable for smaller farmers, promoting increased farm productivity and self-sufficiency in food grains.

#### Resolution No. 8

The resolution advocates for improving the economic conditions of laborers through amendments to the Minimum Wages Act, ensuring respectable livelihoods for the working class.

#### Resolution No. 9

The Akali Dal seeks permission to establish a broadcasting station at the Golden Temple, Amritsar, for Gurbani Kirtan transmission, financed and managed by the Khalsa Panth under Indian government oversight.

#### Resolution No. 10

The resolution recommends amendments to the Hindu Succession Act to ensure women's inheritance rights in their father-in-law's property. It also advocates exempting agricultural land from wealth and estate taxes.

#### Resolution No. 11

The Akali Dal proposes the establishment of a central ministry for the welfare of scheduled and non-scheduled castes, urging budgetary allocations proportional to their population for socio-economic upliftment.

#### Resolution No. 12

The resolution demands justice in Ravi-Beas water distribution and approval for new sugar and textile mills in Punjab to implement an agro-industrial strategy for economic growth.

## VI. Dharma Yudh Morcha

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, tensions between the Sant Nirankari Mission and orthodox Sikh groups, notably the Damdami Taksal led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, escalated significantly. A pivotal event was the 1978 Amritsar clash, where protests against a Nirankari gathering resulted in the deaths of 13 Sikhs and 3 Nirankaris, intensifying animosities. Bhindranwale's vehement opposition to the Nirankaris bolstered his standing among Sikhs who perceived the sect as heretical. Initially, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) maintained a neutral stance toward the Nirankaris. However, recognizing Bhindranwale's growing influence, SAD aligned with him during the Dharam Yudh Morcha, a campaign initiated in 1982 advocating for Sikh rights and the implementation of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution.

The Anandpur Sahib Resolution, adopted by the Akali Dal in 1973, called for greater autonomy for Punjab within a federal structure, recognition of Sikh identity, and resolution of economic grievances, particularly concerning water and territorial disputes. The inability to resolve these demands led to the launch of the Dharam Yudh Morcha on August 4, 1982. Spearheaded by Akali Dal leader Sant Harcharan Singh Longowal and supported by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the movement aimed to pressurize the central government into meeting these demands.

Bhindranwale, the charismatic leader of the Damdami Taksal seminary, had emerged as a polarizing figure in Sikh politics. While initially supported by Congress as a counterbalance to the Akalis, he grew into an influential and radical leader with significant support among rural Sikhs. Under his leadership, the Dharam Yudh Morcha became a civil disobedience movement, involving mass protests and clashes with the police.

The movement's agenda combined political demands with religious undertones, resonating strongly with Punjab's rural Sikh population. However, Bhindranwale's inflammatory rhetoric and escalating sectarian violence led the central government to label the movement as a secessionist threat. By this time, militancy began to take root in Punjab, with hardliners calling for a separate Sikh state, Khalistan.

Bhindranwale's occupation of the Golden Temple and the assassination of Deputy Inspector-General A.S. Atwal in 1983 at the temple premises signaled a breakdown of law and order. The Golden Temple increasingly became a hub of militant activity, setting the stage for a violent confrontation between the militants and the state. These developments culminated in Operation Blue Star in 1984, a military action aimed at flushing out militants from the Golden Temple complex, which had far-reaching consequences for Punjab and India's Sikh community.

## VII. Operation Blue Star

The stalemate between the Akali Dal and the Central Government culminated in Operation Blue Star, a military operation launched in June 1984 to flush out Bhindranwale and his armed supporters from the Golden Temple.

### A. Build-Up to the Operation

By 1984, the Golden Temple complex had become heavily fortified under Bhindranwale and his military adviser, Major General Shahbeg Singh, a dismissed Indian Army officer who had been dismissed from the army on charges of corruption, was later cleared of any wrongdoing by the court.. The militants had smuggled large quantities of arms into the temple, turning it into a fortress with strategically placed defenses.

On June 1, 1984, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) opened fire on the temple, initiating the first phase of the operation. By June 3, Punjab was under complete curfew, with communication lines cut and the press censored. The Indian Army surrounded the temple, preparing for the final assault.

### B. The Operation

The assault began on the night of June 5, 1984. The militants fiercely resisted, forcing the Army to bring in heavy artillery, including tanks. The most intense fighting took place at the Akal Takht, the highest seat of Sikh authority, where Bhindranwale and his core supporters were stationed.

Despite initial expectations of a quick operation, the resistance from militants prolonged the conflict, leading to heavy casualties and significant damage to the temple complex. By June 6, the Akal Takht was destroyed, and Bhindranwale was found dead among a heap of bodies. The operation officially ended on June 10, with most militants either killed or captured.

The Indian Army reported 554 deaths among militants and civilians, along with 83 casualties on its side. However, unofficial estimates suggest the toll was much higher. The use of tanks and the desecration of the holy shrine deeply alienated the Sikh community worldwide.

## VIII. Aftermath of Operation Blue Star

The fallout from Operation Blue Star was catastrophic. On October 31, 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, triggering one of the worst communal riots in Indian history. Over 8,000 Sikhs were massacred in anti-Sikh pogroms, with Delhi being the epicenter of the violence.

In 1985, Sikh militants based in Canada bombed an Air India flight, killing 329 people, claiming it as an act of revenge for Bhindranwale's death. Punjab became the epicenter of an insurgency that lasted until

the mid-1990s. Moderate Akali leaders, like Longowal, sought to broker peace, resulting in the Rajiv Gandhi-Longowal Accord in July 1985. However, the accord faced resistance from hardliners, and Longowal himself was assassinated by Sikh militants.

By the mid-1990s, the insurgency subsided as the population turned against the militants, and political stability returned to Punjab under moderate Akali leaders like Parkash Singh Badal. Badal here moderated the Akali stance by making Punjabiyaat the ideology of SAD, emphasizing regional unity and cultural identity over religious exclusivity, which played a crucial role in restoring harmony and rebuilding trust among Punjab's diverse communities.

## IX. Political Dominance of Shiromani Akali Dal and BJP Alliance in Punjab (1997–2017)

The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) maintained a significant political presence in the Punjab Legislative Assembly between 1997 and 2017, with a strategic alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) playing a pivotal role in their performance. This coalition, built on a framework of mutual electoral benefit and ideological accommodation, allowed both parties to consolidate their respective support bases.

In the 1997 Assembly elections, the SAD-BJP alliance achieved a decisive victory, winning 75 out of 117 seats. The Akali Dal contributed significantly with its 92 contested seats, while the BJP secured 23 seats as part of the seat-sharing arrangement. This victory was underpinned by a combined vote share of 37.64%, signaling strong voter endorsement of their joint platform.

However, in 2002, the alliance faced a setback, winning only 41 seats. The Akali Dal's tally fell to 34 seats, with the BJP managing 7 seats. Their combined vote share dipped to 31.08%, reflecting reduced voter confidence and internal challenges.

A resurgence occurred in the 2007 elections when the coalition reclaimed power, with the Akali Dal winning 48 seats and the BJP adding 19 seats. The alliance's vote share increased to 37.09%, indicating a recovery in public trust and effective campaign strategies.

The partnership reached another milestone in 2012, with the SAD securing 56 seats and the BJP contributing 12 seats to the coalition's total of 68 seats. Although their combined vote share slightly decreased to 34.73%, the alliance maintained its dominance, emphasizing the strength of their joint governance model.

One of the key reasons for the political success of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)-BJP alliance in Punjab was the effective outreach to Dalit voters, a significant portion of the state's population. Under Parkash Singh Badal's leadership, the alliance implemented a series of welfare schemes targeting Dalits, helping to consolidate their support. Starting in 1997, Badal launched initiatives such as the Shagun scheme, providing financial aid for Dalit and OBC women's marriages, and offering 200 units of free power to

Dalits and farmers. In 2007, the Atta-Dal scheme provided free flour and pulses to families below the poverty line, indirectly benefiting Dalits. Badal also focused on Dalit communities like the Ravidassia and Valmiki, exemplified by the foundation of the Guru Ravidass memorial and a Rs 110 crore village development project. Additionally, the construction of the Rs 200 crore Bhagwan Valmiki Tirath Sthal in Amritsar further solidified his appeal. These welfare measures were pivotal in securing the loyalty of Dalit voters, contributing significantly to the alliance's political success in Punjab.

The SAD-BJP alliance was underpinned by a clear division of electoral responsibilities and ideological understanding. The Akali Dal primarily catered to rural constituencies, leveraging its influence among Sikh voters, while the BJP focused on urban centers and Hindu voters. This complementary approach, coupled with the leadership synergy between Parkash Singh Badal of the SAD and senior BJP leaders, ensured the coalition's effectiveness in both governance and elections.

Overall, the political dominance of the SAD, reinforced by its alliance with the BJP, shaped Punjab's political landscape for two decades, reflecting a combination of strategic seat-sharing, vote bank consolidation, and leadership collaboration.

## X. Recent Electoral Decline of SAD

The recent electoral downfall of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) in Punjab, as witnessed in the last two Lok Sabha and Assembly elections, reflects a significant decline in its political relevance and voter trust. The party, which once dominated Punjab's political landscape with its strong panthic (Sikh-centric) and pro-farmer identity, has faced a host of challenges. Below is a comprehensive account of the reasons behind its electoral downfall, incorporating all relevant factors:

### A. Abandonment of Core Issues

SAD's historical identity as a party championing Sikh and agrarian issues has been overshadowed in recent years by its broader electoral strategies. Issues like the agrarian crisis, farmer suicides, and the state's procurement challenges were inadequately addressed, diminishing its pro-farmer image. The party's failure to offer robust solutions for rural Punjab—such as crop diversification, assurances on Minimum Support Price (MSP), and rural development—alienated the farming community. This marked a stark departure from SAD's traditional voter base in rural areas.

### B. Religious Controversies and Loss of Credibility

SAD's perceived interference in key Sikh religious institutions, including the Akal Takht and the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), has been another critical factor. The party was accused of undermining these institutions for political gain, leading to resentment among the Sikh community.

The sacrilege incidents involving the Guru Granth Sahib during SAD's tenure, and the subsequent failure to deliver justice, were particularly damaging. These incidents were seen as a betrayal of Sikh values and led to widespread protests, further alienating the party's traditional Sikh vote base. Many voters felt SAD had failed in its duty to protect Sikh religious interests, undermining its credibility.

#### C. The Drug Menace and Governance Failures

The rampant drug problem in Punjab has been a persistent issue, and SAD faced heavy criticism for its inability to tackle the crisis effectively during its rule. Accusations of complicity, corruption, and inaction under its government amplified public anger, especially among families affected by the drug epidemic. Opposition parties, such as the Congress and AAP, effectively used this issue to portray SAD as negligent and complicit, particularly targeting younger voters who were most affected.

#### D. Leadership Challenges and Nepotism

The leadership of Sukhbir Singh Badal has been a major point of contention within the party and among voters. Under his tenure, SAD transitioned from a grassroots, democratic organization to a family-centric entity dominated by the Badal family. Accusations of nepotism and the sidelining of senior leaders caused internal dissent and weakened the party's organizational strength.

Critics viewed Sukhbir's leadership as lacking vision and adaptability to changing political dynamics. His over-reliance on the BJP alliance, coupled with an inability to address internal rifts or present a strong alternative to Punjab's electorate, further eroded public confidence.

#### E. Breakdown of the SAD-BJP Alliance

The decades-long SAD-BJP alliance, once seen as a key strength, disintegrated in the wake of the farmers' protests. While the alliance historically allowed SAD to consolidate rural Sikh and urban Hindu votes, its termination fragmented the party's support base. The BJP, in turn, began to expand its own base in Punjab, particularly among Hindu voters, further marginalizing SAD in urban constituencies.

#### F. Rise of New Political Players

The emergence of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) as a formidable political force in Punjab disrupted the traditional two-party dominance of SAD and Congress. AAP's focus on governance issues like education, healthcare, and corruption appealed to a wide range of voters, including the youth and urban populations. Also, after the Granth Sahib desecration and Dera pardon controversies, many Panthic Jatt Sikhs felt betrayed by the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and turned to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). AAP capitalized on this discontent by presenting itself as a principled alternative, advocating for justice in these issues and appealing to Sikh religious sentiments. As a result, AAP successfully captured a significant portion of the core Jatt

vote that had traditionally supported SAD, weakening the party's political dominance in Punjab. In the 2022 Assembly elections, AAP's landslide victory not only captured the anti-incumbency sentiment but also siphoned votes away from SAD, leaving it with limited room for recovery.

#### G. Internal Dissent and Organizational Weakness

SAD has been grappling with internal dissent following its electoral defeats. Senior leaders and party workers have openly criticized the leadership and called for reforms to restore the party's credibility. However, the inability to address these concerns or undertake significant restructuring has weakened the party's organizational capacity and morale.

#### H. Corruption and Poor Governance Allegations

During its tenure in government, SAD faced allegations of corruption, favoritism, and inefficiency. Governance failures, particularly in addressing unemployment, infrastructure development, and law-and-order issues, became prominent election issues. The public perception of a government that served vested interests rather than the people was effectively used by opposition parties to campaign against SAD.

#### I. Neglect of Youth and Changing Political Dynamics

SAD's electoral strategies failed to resonate with Punjab's younger voters, who sought solutions to unemployment, education, and substance abuse. The party's traditional rhetoric did not address the aspirations of this demographic, further contributing to its declining appeal. Meanwhile, its inability to adapt to the rise of multi-party competition and changing voter priorities left it struggling to stay relevant in Punjab's political landscape.

#### J. Fallout from the Farmers' Protests

One of the most immediate and damaging factors was the party's mishandling of the 2020–2021 farmers' protests against the three controversial farm laws introduced by the BJP-led central government. SAD initially supported the laws, a stance that angered Punjab's farmers, who form the backbone of its voter base. Under intense pressure, the party reversed its position and eventually broke its long-standing alliance with the BJP. However, this flip-flop was perceived as opportunistic rather than principled, leading to a severe erosion of trust among voters. The rural electorate, particularly farmers, felt betrayed by the party's initial support for the laws, which amplified their discontent.

### XI. Prominent Leaders of SAD

#### A. Master Tara Singh

Master Tara Singh was a pivotal figure in Sikh and Punjab politics during the early and mid-20th century, playing a crucial role in shaping the political and social dynamics of the state. Born on June 24, 1885, in the village of Haryal near Rawalpindi into a Hindu Khatri Sehajdhari family, his early life was

deeply influenced by Sikh martyrdom stories. Rejecting the Arya Samaji influence, he embraced Sikhism, becoming a baptized Sikh and adopting the name Tara Singh.

Tara Singh graduated from Khalsa College under Punjab University and later became the headmaster of Khalsa High School in Lyallpur. His dedication to Sikh education and community welfare earned him the title "Master." His journey into politics began with his involvement in the anti-British agitation in 1907 and expanded with the foundation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) in 1920. Master Tara Singh emerged as a leader of the gurdwara reform movement, advocating for Sikh control over their religious institutions. His role in the passage of the Gurdwara Act of 1925 cemented his status as a national Sikh leader.

Master Tara Singh maintained complex relations with the Congress Party, participating in its movements against British rule while critiquing its inadequate attention to Sikh concerns. In 1927, he successfully ensured the inclusion of Sikhs in legislative representation during the Congress session in Madras. However, the Nehru Committee Report of 1928, which overlooked Sikh interests, disappointed him deeply. He also opposed the Congress's stance on the Communal Award of 1932, accusing the party of aligning with Muslim interests at the expense of Sikh representation. Despite these differences, he participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement, leading Akali Jathas to Peshawar in support of the Pathans against British atrocities, for which he was arrested and jailed.

During the Partition era, Master Tara Singh vehemently opposed the idea of Pakistan, advocating for an undivided India. At the SAD conference in February 1940, he reiterated the demand for 'Swaraj' and coined the term 'Azad Punjab' in June 1943, envisioning an independent Punjab if Pakistan were created. Despite his efforts to prevent Partition, he eventually guided the Sikh community to remain with India, rejecting Muhammad Ali Jinnah's offers for Sikhs to join Pakistan. Tara Singh's successful negotiation with key political figures like Sardar Patel ensured that Sikh religious and cultural concerns were addressed during the formation of India. As the leader of the Akali Dal, Master Tara Singh was instrumental in ensuring that East Punjab remained part of India, preventing its inclusion in Pakistan. Tara Singh strategically aligned with Hindu leaders, particularly from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), to create a united front for the protection of Sikhs and Hindus. Master Tara Singh also played a crucial role in rehabilitating Sikh families affected by the Partition.

In post-Partition India, Master Tara Singh shifted his focus to the Punjabi Suba movement, which sought the creation of a Punjabi-speaking state. However, his demand for a linguistic state faced opposition from both Congress and the Jana Sangh. Arrested several times during this movement, he eventually accepted the 'regional formula,' proposing regions within Punjab based on the population's primary language—Punjabi or Hindi. Although this strategy brought the Congress and SAD closer, it did not fully resolve the issue. Negotiations with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1956 briefly led the SAD to suspend its political activities in favor of religious and cultural initiatives. However, by 1957, Tara Singh broke away from the Congress, accusing the party of marginalizing the SAD.



The SAD's defeat in the 1958 SGPC president elections was seen as a setback for the Punjabi Suba movement, but a thumping victory in the 1960 SGPC elections revitalized the campaign. Tara Singh celebrated this as a referendum in favor of the movement. Alongside these efforts, he advocated for caste reservation for Sikh communities, launching campaigns that eventually led to the inclusion of Mazhabi Sikhs, Ramdasias, Kabir Panthis, and Sikligars in the Scheduled Castes list. His progressive approach also saw him appoint Gopal Singh Khalsa, a Dalit, as the Leader of the Opposition in the Punjab Assembly in 1952, a landmark decision in Sikh politics.

Tara Singh's later years saw him at a crossroads with Sant Fateh Singh, leading to a division within the SAD during the 1965 SGPC elections. This period marked the decline of Tara Singh's influence and the rise of Fateh Singh, who later paved the way for Parkash Singh Badal's prominence in Sikh politics. Badal often invoked Tara Singh's legacy to critique Congress policies and highlight the sacrifices of the Sikh community.

Master Tara Singh's contributions to Punjab's politics were foundational, shaping the state's political trajectory and addressing key issues of Sikh representation, autonomy, and social justice. Despite his polarizing leadership, his legacy continues to be remembered as a defining chapter in the history of Punjab and the Shiromani Akali Dal.

## B. Sant Fateh Singh

Sant Fateh Singh was a prominent Sikh religious and political leader who played a decisive role in shaping Punjab's political landscape and spearheading the Punjabi Suba movement. Born on October 27, 1911, in Badiala village in Bathinda district, Punjab, he belonged to a modest family and had no formal education. At the age of 13, he began learning to read and write Punjabi under the guidance of a Sikh scholar, Ishar Singh, as his deep interest in Sikh scriptures and faith was recognized by his father, Channan Singh. Fateh Singh later moved to Ganganagar in the princely state of Bikaner (now in Rajasthan), where he dedicated himself to spreading Sikh teachings. He actively worked to promote education, establish schools, build gurdwaras, and even set up an orphanage, demonstrating his commitment to community welfare.

In the 1950s, Fateh Singh entered politics and became a strong advocate for the creation of a Punjabi-speaking state, known as Punjabi Suba. He aligned himself with the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), and by the late 1950s, he had risen to become its senior vice-president. Fateh Singh led numerous marches and campaigns supporting the Punjabi Suba movement, which aimed to reorganize Punjab along linguistic lines to preserve Punjabi culture and Sikh identity. On December 18, 1960, he began a fast-unto-death to pressure the Indian government into accepting the demand. Prominent leaders, including Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, intervened to persuade him to end his fast. Eventually, he relented on January 9, 1961, after Nehru issued a statement indicating support for reorganizing Punjab on a linguistic basis. Scholars like Paul R. Brass observed that Fateh Singh tactically

emphasized the linguistic aspect of the demand while downplaying its religious undertones, ensuring broader acceptance of the movement.

In July 1962, Fateh Singh broke away from Master Tara Singh, another prominent Akali leader, and formed his own faction of the Akali Dal. This division marked a significant turning point in Akali politics. On October 2, 1962, Fateh Singh's faction gained control of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC). In the SGPC elections held on January 17, 1965, his faction emerged victorious, winning 90 seats compared to 45 seats secured by Master Tara Singh's group, further consolidating Fateh Singh's political influence.

However, negotiations with the central government regarding Punjabi Suba proved challenging. Dissatisfied with the lack of progress, Fateh Singh threatened another fast-unto-death and self-immolation on August 16, 1965. Yet, the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965 compelled him to postpone his protest and urge his followers to support the national government during the crisis. After the war ended, the government established a Cabinet Committee comprising Indira Gandhi, Mahavir Tyagi, and Yashwantrao Chavan to examine the Punjabi Suba proposal. At Fateh Singh's request, a Parliamentary Consultative Committee headed by Lok Sabha Speaker Sardar Hukam Singh was also formed. The Hukam Singh Committee's report, made public on January 18, 1966, recommended reorganizing Punjab on linguistic lines. Following this, Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister, introduced the Punjab Reorganization Bill in the Lok Sabha on September 3, 1966. As a result, the modern state of Punjab was created on November 1, 1966.

Despite this achievement, Fateh Singh was dissatisfied with certain aspects of the reorganization, particularly the exclusion of Chandigarh and other Punjabi-speaking areas from Punjab. He began another fast on December 17, 1966, threatening self-immolation on December 27. However, he was persuaded to abandon his protest by Giani Gurmukh Singh Musafir, the Chief Minister of Punjab, and Sardar Hukam Singh, acting on behalf of Indira Gandhi. Fateh Singh ended his fast on December 27, 1966.

By the late 1960s, Fateh Singh's influence began to decline. He launched another fast on January 26, 1970, demanding the inclusion of Chandigarh in Punjab, but ended it just four days later. Recognizing his waning support, he announced his retirement from active politics on March 25, 1972. He passed away on October 30, 1972, in Amritsar.

Sant Fateh Singh's leadership left a profound impact on Punjab's political and cultural history. His role in the Punjabi Suba movement and his ability to navigate the complex interplay of religion, language, and politics were instrumental in shaping the modern state of Punjab. Though his influence diminished in later years, his contributions to Sikh politics and Punjab's reorganization remain significant milestones in India's history.

### C. Harchand Singh Longowal

Harchand Singh Longowal, popularly known as Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, was a significant figure in Punjab's politics and the leadership of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) during one of the most tumultuous periods in the state's history. Born on January 2, 1932, in Gidariani village, Sangrur (then part of Patiala), Longowal was deeply rooted in Sikh traditions from an early age. He studied Sikh scriptures, learned religious music, and later earned the title of 'Sant' after building a Gurdwara in memory of 18th-century Sikh scholar Bhai Mani Singh in the village of Longowal. His early involvement in activism came in 1964, when he led a movement to protect Sikh institutions in Paonta Sahib, marking the beginning of a political career steeped in community-oriented initiatives.

Longowal's formal entry into politics occurred in 1965 when he was inducted into the working committee of the Shiromani Akali Dal. He became a member of the Punjab Vidhan Sabha in 1969, showcasing his growing prominence within Akali politics. Longowal gained wider recognition during the Akali movement against the Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. As a leader of the Akali Dal, he launched multiple civil disobedience campaigns and emerged as a central figure in Punjab's fight for political and religious autonomy. By 1980, he had assumed the presidency of the Shiromani Akali Dal and began engaging in talks with Indira Gandhi's government. However, these negotiations failed to yield substantial results.

In December 1983, Longowal invited Sikh fundamentalist Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale to take up residence in the Golden Temple Complex, initially at the Guru Nanak Niwas and later in a building adjacent to the Akal Takht, believing he could influence him to moderate on key issues. The early 1980s, however, saw the rise of militancy in Punjab and Bhindranwale's growing prominence as the face of the Khalistan Movement. While Longowal was initially associated with Bhindranwale, their relationship soured as ideological differences between them deepened.

This period also saw Longowal's leadership tested during Operation Bluestar in 1984, when the Indian Army stormed the Golden Temple to flush out militants. Longowal, along with other Akali leaders, was rescued by the Army, a move that underscored his complex position between Sikh hardliners, the moderate Akali faction, and the central government.

Despite these challenges, Longowal remained steadfast in his pursuit of peace. In July 1985, he signed the historic Rajiv-Longowal Accord with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, aiming to address the demands of the Sikh community and restore normalcy in Punjab. The accord included provisions for transferring Chandigarh to Punjab, rehabilitating Sikh deserters from the Army, and compensating victims of violence in Punjab and Delhi. While the agreement was a major step toward reconciliation, its promises were largely unfulfilled, leading to dissatisfaction among various factions. The accord also faced significant opposition from within the Akali Dal, as well as protests in Haryana and Punjab.

On August 20, 1985, barely a month after signing the accord, Longowal was assassinated by two assailants, Jarnail Singh Halwara and Gyan Singh Leel, near a Gurdwara in Sherpur village, Sangrur. His assassination at the age of 53 dealt a severe blow to the peace process in Punjab and highlighted the deep divisions within the state during its darkest period of militancy.

Longowal's leadership was marked by his efforts to balance the demands of various stakeholders—moderates, hardliners, the Punjab government, and the central government. While some hailed him as the voice of moderation and a peacemaker, others criticized him for his perceived oscillation between different groups, accusing him of a "double-play" that compromised his effectiveness as a leader. Nevertheless, Longowal's contributions to Punjab politics and his attempts to restore peace remain integral to the state's political history.

The Central Government issued a postage stamp in his memory on August 20, 1987, commemorating his efforts and sacrifice. Longowal never married but left a legacy through his disciple, Gobind Singh Longowal, who later became a prominent SAD leader and an MLA. Today, the Shiromani Akali Dal organizes commemorative events on Longowal's birth and death anniversaries, honoring his pivotal role in Punjab's political and social history.

#### D. Surjit Singh Barnala

Surjit Singh Barnala was a towering figure in Punjab and Akali politics, whose leadership was characterized by moderation, statesmanship, and a commitment to constitutional values. Born on October 21, 1925, in Ateli village, Gurgaon district, in joint Punjab, Barnala pursued his education in Nabha before graduating with a law degree (LL.B) from Lucknow. His political journey began in the Quit India Movement of 1942, where he actively participated in India's freedom struggle. After practicing law for a few years, he entered politics in 1952, contesting from the Dhanaula assembly constituency. Although he narrowly lost his first election by just three votes, this marked the beginning of an illustrious career in public life.

Barnala steadily rose within the ranks of the Shiromani Akali Dal, becoming a key leader in Punjab politics. He was elected to the Punjab Assembly multiple times, serving in 1967, 1969, 1972, 1980, and 1985, and held various important ministerial positions. As Education Minister in the Gurnam Singh government, he was instrumental in establishing the Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar, a testament to his vision for promoting education and cultural heritage. He entered national politics in 1977, when he was elected to the Lok Sabha and appointed Union Minister for Agriculture, Irrigation, Water Resources, and Forests in the Morarji Desai-led Janata Party government. During this tenure, he signed the historic Ganga Waters Agreement (Farakka Agreement) with Bangladesh, demonstrating his diplomatic and administrative acumen. His ability to manage key portfolios effectively cemented his reputation as a capable leader.

Barnala's leadership faced its greatest challenge during the 1980s, a period of intense militancy and political turmoil in Punjab. He played a pivotal role in the Rajiv-Longowal Accord, signed in 1985 between then-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, a moderate Akali leader. The accord was a critical attempt to bring peace to Punjab and address the Sikh community's grievances. Following the assassination of Longowal by militants, Barnala was elected acting President of the Shiromani Akali Dal on August 25, 1985. In the assembly elections held after the accord, he won from the Barnala constituency and was unanimously chosen as Punjab's Chief Minister on September 27, 1985. His tenure, which lasted until May 11, 1987, was marked by significant efforts to restore peace and stability in Punjab during one of its most volatile periods. As a moderate Akali leader, Barnala sought to navigate the state through a challenging political and social landscape, maintaining his commitment to governance and peace despite intense pressures.

At the national level, Barnala continued to play a significant role. He served as Governor of Tamil Nadu twice, first from 1990 to 1991 and later from 2004 to 2011. During his first term, he famously refused to recommend the dismissal of the DMK government under the "otherwise" provision of Article 356 of the Constitution, even when Prime Minister Chandrashekhar's government pressured him to do so. This decision led to his transfer to Bihar, a move he resisted by resigning as Governor, exemplifying his steadfast adherence to constitutional principles. In 1997, Barnala was the candidate of the BJP and its allies for the Vice President of India. A year earlier, he was almost considered as a consensus candidate for the Prime Minister's post when the United Front was being formed after the Congress's defeat. However, his own party, the Shiromani Akali Dal, chose to support the BJP instead of him.

Despite his stature, Barnala's political journey was not without challenges. His relationship with the Shiromani Akali Dal faced strains, especially after differences with Parkash Singh Badal led to the party's bifurcation. Although he resigned as party president, he remained active in political life and even attempted to form a new political front, the "Sanjha Morcha." However, this alliance failed to make an impact in Punjab. Beyond politics, Barnala was a man of many talents—a painter, an author, and a statesman. He wrote two books, *\*Story of an Escape\** and *\*My Other Two Daughters\**, the latter of which was transliterated into braille. Despite personal tragedies, including the loss of his youngest son Neelinder in a road accident in 1996 and his daughter Amrit Kaur to cancer in 2012, Barnala remained devoted to public service and his creative pursuits.

Surjit Singh Barnala passed away at the age of 91, leaving behind a legacy of moderation, integrity, and service during some of Punjab's most challenging periods. As Chief Minister during the height of militancy, as a Union Minister navigating complex national issues, and as a Governor committed to constitutional values, Barnala exemplified the qualities of a true statesman. His contributions continue to inspire discussions on leadership and governance in the face of adversity, making him a lasting figure in Punjab and Indian politics.

## E. Parkash Singh Badal

Parkash Singh Badal (December 8, 1927 – April 25, 2023) was a towering figure in Indian and Punjab politics, shaping the trajectory of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and leaving an indelible mark on the socio-political fabric of Punjab. Born near Malout, Punjab, into a Sikh family of landowning farmers, Badal's political career spanned over seven decades, beginning at the time of India's independence. His journey was marked by a deep engagement with the challenges and aspirations of Punjab, from the partition of India to the farmers' protests of 2020-21. Over this period, he served as the Chief Minister of Punjab five times (1970–71, 1977–80, 1997–2002, 2007–12, 2012–17) and held the presidency of the SAD from 1996 to 2008.

Parkash Singh Badal's politics significantly shaped Punjab's trajectory and transformed the Shiromani Akali Dal into a formidable regional force. Under his leadership, the SAD evolved from a Panthic party centered on Sikh issues into a broader platform embodying Punjabiyaat, representing the state's diverse socio-political and economic aspirations. The challenges he faced and the strategies he employed to address them left a lasting impact on both the state and the party.

In the turbulent 1980s, Punjab faced one of its darkest periods, marked by militancy, communal strife, and political instability. Badal's moderate and pragmatic politics were instrumental in navigating these challenges. He rejected extremist ideologies, advocating instead for a harmonious vision of Punjabiyaat that sought to unite communities rather than divide them. This vision became critical in steering the SAD away from the radical elements of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, ensuring the party's participation in India's democratic process during a time when insurgency threatened to destabilize the region. Badal's secular outlook was evident in his efforts to integrate Punjab's Hindu minority into the SAD's fold, fielding Hindu candidates and focusing on inclusive governance.

The aftermath of militancy in Punjab required rebuilding trust among communities and restoring the state's governance. As Chief Minister in his third term (1997–2002), Badal prioritized development and infrastructure to signal a return to stability. His government focused on improving rural connectivity, electrification, and pro-farmer policies, though these initiatives were often criticized for lacking structural depth. During this period, he consolidated the SAD's partnership with the BJP, forming a stable coalition that allowed the party to remain a dominant force in Punjab's politics. This alliance, rooted in shared electoral interests, also positioned the SAD as a key player in national coalitions under the Vajpayee-led NDA.

In the post-militancy era, Badal's leadership reflected a keen understanding of Punjab's agrarian economy. His tenure saw a mix of populist measures and long-term initiatives aimed at addressing rural distress. However, critics argued that his policies often prioritized short-term electoral gains over sustainable economic reforms. The agrarian crisis deepened under his administration, with rising farmer debts and declining incomes, issues that would later culminate in the farmers' protests of 2020–21.

The challenges of governance in post-turbulent Punjab also highlighted the SAD's struggles to adapt to a changing socio-political landscape. During Badal's later terms (2007–2017), his administration introduced several welfare schemes, such as the Atta-Dal Scheme for subsidized food grains and the establishment of Adarsh Schools to improve rural education. These efforts were aimed at addressing grassroots issues and maintaining the SAD's connection with its core voter base. However, allegations of corruption, mismanagement, and failure to address pressing issues like unemployment and the drug menace tarnished the party's image. Despite these challenges, Badal's personal rapport with Punjab's agrarian community remained strong, a factor that played a critical role in sustaining the SAD's relevance during his lifetime.

The farmers' protests against the central government's agricultural laws in 2020–21 marked a defining moment in Badal's political legacy. The SAD's decision to sever ties with the BJP after decades of alliance was a testament to Badal's deep-rooted commitment to Punjab's agrarian identity. By returning his Padma Vibhushan award in solidarity with the farmers, Badal reaffirmed his connection with their struggles, a move that resonated widely across Punjab. This pragmatic yet principled stance underscored the essence of his leadership—grounded in Punjab's socio-economic realities and driven by the need to address its pressing concerns.

Badal's passing in 2023 marked the end of an era for the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and Punjab politics. The party, now led by his son Sukhbir Singh Badal, faces significant challenges in reclaiming its grassroots connection and addressing the evolving aspirations of Punjab's youth. The decline of the SAD in recent years, culminating in its poor performance in the 2022 state elections, reflects the growing disconnect between the party's leadership and its traditional voter base. The Akal Takht's revocation of the title 'Panth Rattan Fakhr-e-Qaum,' bestowed on Parkash Singh Badal in 2011 for his service to the Sikh Panth, after Sukhbir Badal admitted to several missteps under SAD's leadership, including the 2007 pardon granted to Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim and the failure to address the 2015 sacrilege of the Guru Granth Sahib at Bargari village, further underscores the shifting dynamics within the community. Despite these challenges, Badal's legacy remains a touchstone for Punjab's politics, symbolizing the complex interplay between regional aspirations, national interests, and the enduring influence of grassroots leadership.

## XII. Conclusion

The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), once a dominant political force in Punjab, has played a critical role in shaping the socio-political and religious landscape of the state. From its origins in the Akali movement to its active participation in India's freedom struggle and its advocacy for Sikh rights, the SAD's historical contributions remain deeply embedded in Punjab's identity.

However, its recent electoral downfall highlights the complexities of evolving voter priorities, leadership challenges, and governance failures. Missteps during the farmers' protests, accusations of nepotism, and

perceived neglect of core issues like agriculture, unemployment, and youth aspirations have significantly eroded public trust. Additionally, the rise of new political players such as the Aam Aadmi Party has disrupted the traditional SAD-Congress dominance in Punjab.

To regain relevance, the SAD must undertake comprehensive reforms, reconnect with its grassroots base, and address the pressing socio-economic challenges facing Punjab. Its ability to adapt to changing political dynamics while staying true to its foundational values will determine its role in shaping the future of Punjab's political landscape.



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