ELECTORAL POLITICS IN PUNJAB

FACTORS AND PHASES

Ashutosh Kumar

Electoral Politics in Punjab

This book examines electoral politics in the state of Punjab, India as it has evolved since the colonial period. It underlines the emergence of the state as a singular unit for electoral analysis in the last three decades.

This book:

- Charts the common trends and developments that have dominated politics in Punjab, and those that continue to play an important role in the government of the state;
- Examines state parties and their leadership in the context of party alliances, campaigns and electoral verdicts;
- Presents a comparative study of the assembly and Lok Sabha elections held in the state after reorganisation in 1966 with the objective of highlighting differences in electoral issues taken up by the parties.

An important intervention in the study of state-level politics in India, this book will be of great interest to students and researchers of politics, especially comparative politics and political institutions, political sociology and social anthropology, and South Asian studies.

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1 Framing state-level electoral politics
An introduction

India for a long time has been hailed worldwide for being a successful democracy. Its success, however, is being viewed and judged primarily in its minimalist form, encompassing nothing but a multiparty system, periodically held free elections, high levels of participation, and contestation that result in the peaceful and regular transfers of political power on a periodic basis. As a 'new' democracy, India has an uninterrupted history of holding free elections over more than seven decades now (even the emergency imposed in the mid-seventies did not disturb this, it only delayed it for a year).[1] In its seven-decades old democratic career, the country has been witness to 17 Lok Sabha elections and nearly 400 Assembly elections, not to mention the countless local bodies' elections which have got their own salience after the seventy-third and seventy-fourth constitutional amendment (Kumar, 2019c, p. 1).[2]

India has become a far more representative democracy in recent decades, as demonstrated by increased level of participation and representation. The impressive size and scale of social and cultural identities along the regional lines have contributed to the presence of political parties of different hues, each having distinct claims to represent these identities. It is not only the sheer number of parties but also the variety of these parties in terms of their ideologies, the social and spatial support base that easily makes Indian democracy akin to 'an electoral laboratory'. Adam Ziegfeld (2016) considers India ideal for studying party systems in comparative mode on two grounds: First, India is comparable to western democracies for having a 'lengthy democratic history and record of free and fair elections' with its many parties, which are 'short-lived, non-ideological, highly personalistic, and poorly organised', also compares with the party systems of the 'new' democracies. Second, India also presents an 'unparalleled setting' to study the 'puzzling variation' in the success of regional/state level parties as they 'vary in their age, ideological orientation, and support bases' (Ziegfeld, 2016, p. 6).

What has also impressed the political analysts is the sheer scale[3] at which the people's participation takes place in India's elections involving so many candidates from diverse social and economic backgrounds in the fray. India's electorates constitute one-sixth of the global electorates. Arguably, India qualifies to be considered ideal for studying an impressive range of elections-related

issues like the electorates' attitudes and behaviour, manifestos and campaigns, and leadership models that these elections and contending parties throw up. Indian voters stand out for not only that the voters from the marginal social and economic background vote in almost equal percentage than the privileged voters unlike the western democracies but also there has been a sharp decrease in the gender gap and an increase in women turnout in both the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections, especially since 2002, as per the election commission of India data (Kumar and Gupta, 2015, p. 8). Indian 'exceptionalism' also is reflected in the voting behaviour of the Indian voters as almost half of them firm up their voting choices even before the commencement of the election campaign thus underlining their political attentiveness (CSDS-Lokniti national election studies data). This is unlike the western democracies where 'time of vote choice' data reveal that an increasing number of voters are making their voting choices only after the start of the election campaign (Sardesai and Mishra, 2017, p. 84).

Speaking of leadership, India has had 'many more political leaders than other countries—leaders who have won and lost elections, run and mis-run governments, and exercised the political imagination of their constituents in myriad other ways' (Guha, 2010, p. 288).[4] The list includes not only the national but also the other leaders who in their political life remained confined to a particular state or a sub-region within a state and yet were able to play a significant role at the national level (Kumar, 2019c, p. 265).[5]

Arguably, elections form the 'central institution' of India's democracy (Lama-Rewal, 2009, p. 2). The centrality argument gets credence when one thinks in procedural/ institutional terms. At a time when there is a perceptible trust deficit even for the constitutional bodies and functionaries (not to mention the statutory bodies), the Election Commission of India (ECI) has done fairly well to retain the confidence of the citizens. The ECI has been globally recognised for holding 'free and fair' elections. Also, it has pushed successfully for electoral reforms (Kumar, 2019c).

Deepening trust deficit in formal democratic institutions along with lack of effective 'non-electoral' democratic procedures, forums, and peoples' movements on the ground[6] persuade some political analysts to even suggest that the meaning of democracy in India is getting 'menacingly narrowed to signify only elections', as elections not only 'legitimise and authorise the democratic rule but does much more than this' (Khilnani, 1997, p. 193; Palshikar, 2013, p. 165).[7] Connected to almost every aspect of the democratic polity in a significant way, elections in India carry 'the entire society's aspirations to control its opportunities' to the extent that as the 'sole bridge between state and society, they have come to stand for democracy itself' (Khilnani, 1997, p. 58).[8]

What has brought the institution of elections still closer to the citizens in the last three decades is the introduction of local bodies' elections as a result of 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments. It has added yet another level of competitive electoral system extending it effectively to the grass-roots

level, making it much more inclusive and competitive.[9] Arguably, local elections now held every five years in every state under the supervision have further strengthened and provided legitimacy to the basic framework of India's democratic regime (Kumar, 2019c).[10]

Not surprisingly, then, the study of elections,[11] electoral system and electoral politics[12] along with the study of parties and party system holds great significance[13] in the study of Indian politics. Significant social and political upheavals taking place in India, having their impact over the electoral arena, especially since the momentous 1990s, has been of great interest to the analysts (Kumar, 2019c).[14]

Given the vibrancy of electoral democracy in India, greater academic focus has been on the role of processes like politicisation, mobilisation and assertion involving socially and politically dormant groups.[15] Academic attention has been drawn to the way the social basis of the power structure, especially in village India, has undergone a shift through electoral route (Yadav, 1999, p. 2393).

Focus on states

Sifting through elections related literature in India, one finds greater recognition and acceptance of the emergence of states as analytical units in the last three decades. States are being viewed as having emerged as the platforms where not only the electoral politics but the whole gamut of political and economic processes unfolds, which all have national impact (Kumar, 2017b, p. 277).

Why states have emerged as the preferred analytical units rather than election analysts attempting an 'all-India' based election studies needs to be explained. A foremost factor that has brought focus on the state is the politics of identity taking the centre stage. The upsurge in identity politics has reconfigured the democratic politics of India in the last three decades in a significant way as diverse social groups in India have increasingly been politicised and mobilised on the basis of social cleavages rather than on the basis of their common economic interests or ideology. There have been struggles around the assertiveness and conflicting claims of the identity groups, and of struggles amongst them, often fought out on lines of region, religion, language (even dialect), caste, and community. These struggles have found expressions in the changed mode of electoral representation that has brought the local/regional into focus with the hitherto politically dormant groups and regions finding voices. A more genuinely representative democracy in recent India has led to the sharpening of the line of distinction between or among the identity groups and the regions. These identity groups are sought to be collectively recognised and mobilised either on the basis of caste, tribe, language (script), or dialect. Almost all such social groups are confined spatially to a particular state or sub-region within it, especially after the reorganisation of the states on linguistic/ethnic basis undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s. So invariably, processes of politicisation /mobilisation

/participation take place at the state/state sub-regional level, giving primacy to local/regional over national (Kumar, 2017b).[16]

That this can be an important ground for undertaking political research on Indian states was recognised way back by Weiner (1968), much before the Rath Yatra, Mandal, and the Mandir happened in the 1990s. A pioneer in the discipline, Weiner had argued: 'it (is) at the state level that the conflicts among castes, religious groups, tribes and linguistic groups and factions are played out'. Inevitably, in recent decades, the greater level of recognition of constituent states in the Indian Union as the primary units of analyses has led to the emergence of state politics as an autonomous discipline. Even in the discipline of comparative politics, state-level variances have of late received much more focus in the discussion of themes like ethnic movements, party systems, developmental experiences, political institutions, and democratisation, unlike in the past when India was always referred to in cross-national perspective (Kumar, 2017b).

State level parties

What has also brought focus on the states as critical political spaces is the emergence of the state level parties in the last three decades.[17] The sizable presence of state parties in the successive Lok Sabha and the frequency of coalition governments at the centre after the decline of 'Congress system'[18] has made 'all-India'/ national polity seem little more than the aggregation of the state level politics. The ascendancy of the BJP as the dominant party has not altered the ground situation much. What explains the electoral success of state parties in recent India?

First, it was the advent of the 'post-Congress polity'[19] that ushered in the 'third electoral system'. It was marked by fragmented/regionalised party system which provided the political space to the new political entrepreneurs/ parties.[20]

Second, the incentive to set up state parties for the political entrepreneurs came from coalition/minority governments becoming the norm in the 1990s. Coalition governments were formed as a result of opportunistic alliances, marked by tough bargaining among political parties, either preceding the elections or after, and sometime even much after the government formation. With the strong-centre framework remaining largely intact, alliances pave the way through which the state parties hoped to influence decision-making process at the national level and also to bring resources to their respective states.[21]

Third, in its effort to become a polity-wide party,[22] BJP especially after its 1996 setback[23] entered into state-specific alliances with the state parties like JD (S), BJD, INLD, AGP, TDP, AIADMK, SAD, and Shiv Sena. To begin with it accepted to be junior ally. While these alliances helped the BJP, they also helped the state parties in confronting the weakened Congress and leaders to gain in stature at the national level.[24]

Fourth, the long-term ascendance of the state level/sub-state level parties,[25] coinciding with an endemic decline of the Congress having 'rainbow coalitional social support base'[26] is to a great extent due to ongoing collectivisation[27] and mobilisation veering around social cleavages.[28] These processes have helped in the rise of state/sub-state level parties,[29] a phenomenon now visible even in the 'older' democracies with the long tradition of having only national parties in winning positions.[30]

Until recently, state parties, especially the 'ethnic parties', succeeded more than the 'polity-wide' parties in drawing support from the newly mobilised identity groups. Of late, however, even the BJP has successfully sought the support of the numerically weak marginal groups by holding festivals/resurrecting their community icons like in case of Uttar Pradesh.[31] Following the state parties,[32] it has targeted specially the castes/communities which have remained 'sandwiched' between the upper and middle/intermediate castes and the Scheduled castes. So the polity-wide parties including the Congress are no longer averse to play the identity card with impunity.

Fifth, as the state-based parties openly target and cater to the interests of a particular set of social categories, they show greater potential than the 'polity-wide'[33] parties in being able to activate voter linkages that are sectarian, ethnic, and populist in a clientelistic democracy like India. The state-level parties, particularly if they are 'ethnic parties', gain by openly resorting to identity-based clientelistic politics. National/multi-state parties have to play 'a coded ethnic card, invoking ethnic identities quietly in its selection of candidates but not openly in its identification of issues', seeking the support of ascriptive categories through the 'distribution of patronage but never through the rhetoric of identity' (Chandra, 2004, p. 26).

As a result, the state parties have better potential to create and retain a 'core social constituency' which in turn becomes a distinct 'voting community'.[34] This politics of 'vote bank' more often than not gets them electoral dividend under the single plurality electoral system, especially if there is a multi-polar contest[35] and also that it is a 'normal election' and not a 'wave election', a rarity now.[36]

Sixth, the state parties score over national parties like the Congress[37] and the BJP,[38] whose leadership especially at the higher echelons has remained largely with the elite castes due to lack of adequate institutional mechanism to facilitate the intra-party mobility within their organisations. As a result, leaders having support among under-represented social groups have preferred to form their 'own' parties. That way they hope to exert influence as a coalition ally rather being in a marginal position in the parent party.[39]

Seventh, state parties tend to claim that they can be trusted more than the national parties whenever case of any conflict of inter-state dimension arises, be it over the capital city, highways, airports, trade or over river water/dams.[40] Such claims receive many takers especially as the inter-state competiveness/conflicts have increased.

The emergent phenomenon of the 'federalisation' of party system[41] under-lines the need to focus on distinctive character as well as growing autonomy of the state units of the national parties,[42] especially when they have been in the government[43] and in terms of electoral alliances they seek.

Resurgence of state-level leaders

Emergence of states and state-level parties in an increasingly decentred polity, as discussed previously, has led to the resurgence of state leaders, reminiscent of 'Nehru era' satraps in the Congress era. However, unlike them, the new crop of state leaders almost singlehandedly makes crucial policy decisions and their decisions actually affect political happenings in their respective states.[44] As such they leave an indelible imprint over the states' politics. Resurgence of this new crop of state leaders can be attributed to the following factors (Kumar, 2017b, pp. 282–3; Kumar, 2019).

First, with the mode of democracy remaining 'patrimonial' in India, 'patronage' and 'clientelism' catering to primordial identities continue to play a role despite all rhetoric of 'inclusive growth' (Chandra, 2004; Ziegfeld, 2016).[45] State-level leaders in particular playing the role of the 'transactional leaders'[46] directly represent and serve the specific needs, 'not only of territorial constituencies, but frequently the more tangible ones of primordial groups' (Wood, 1984, p. 2) (Burns, 1978). These leaders ensure the direct/visible transfer of public resources to the targeted social constituency in exchange of the electoral support received. Clientelism ensures that the electorates identify themselves with not only the party in power but more so with the party leader as the benefactor/patron.[47] As a result, castes/communities acting as 'political/ voting' categories tend to cling to the leader they consider as their 'own' in a 'realistic' hope of having access to public resources as well as protection, provided the leader comes to power.[48]

Second, given the ascendance of politics of 'presence' and dignity, having their 'men' (hardly any women) in the seat of power also brings 'feel good/ psychic good' factor to the concerned community the leader belongs to, more so if the community in question has been historically on the margin in social and political terms. Even the proven excesses/extravagance of such leaders is condoned/disbelieved by their followers/loyalists.

Third, what explains the power and influence of the state parties' bosses is the sheer size in terms of the territory and population of states that they lord over. Most states are comparable or even bigger than countries in the west. It allows the leaders, especially when they are in power, to gain access to massive 'political resources—organisation, money, votes' besides the bureaucracy if they are in power. This partly explains, more so now than three decades ago as to why 'it is in the states . . . where many of India's most ambitious politicians concentrate their energies', at least in the beginning of their career though they all aim at moving to the centre' (Wood, 1984, p. 2). So, unlike the 'Congress era' when political leaders were able to