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Punjab: Relocations of Hindutva in a Sikh Majority State

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In this article, we assess the current standing, strategies and potential future trajectory of Hindutva in Punjab, the only Sikh majority state in India. Sikhs constitute 55% of the population in Punjab but only 1.7% of the population in India as a whole. As we show later, this complex majority-minority situation has been decisive in shaping the nature of Punjab's/Sikhs' relationship with the central government in Delhi and the Indian nation as a whole, as well as with other religious communities and movements and, not least, with the dominant form of communal and ethno-nationalist Hindutva. Through an analysis of some of the current dynamics of this majority-minority situation, we argue that the future of Hindutva and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Punjab seems to be a complicated and insecure one; importantly, it is also one that is likely to be grounded in further political polarization and radicalization, as well as in Hindu nationalist mobilization around the projection of an imagined 'Khalistan threat' within and outside the Punjab. Our argument is that both for historical reasons and due to the strong anti-Hindutva sentiments that consolidated during the Indian farmers' protest from 2020 onwards, Punjab remains a particularly challenging terrain for Hindutva. The BJP's recent rise in the state can be explained by multiple factors, including growing disaffection with the two other parties attracting urban Hindu votes, the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Aam Admi Party (AAP). However, we contend that playing up the 'Khalistan threat' remains a privileged tool in the hands of the Sangh Parivar because it offers a symbolic resource that can be mobilized regionally, nationally, and internationally. In Punjab, this discursive strategy serves to delegitimize Sikh dissent and reinforce Hindu majoritarian narratives.

Below, we first briefly review the results of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in Punjab. We then introduce the socio-political context of the state before we discuss Hindu nationalist constructions of Sikhs and Sikhism. By unpacking the majority-minority relationship further, we then analyze current Hindu nationalist strategies for consolidation, stressing particularly the intimate intertwinement of this kind of politics

with new forms of neo-Panthic politics and Sikh nationalism.¹ In the conclusion, we take stock of where new oppositional forces capable of mounting a pushback against Hindutva may emerge from.

The 2024 Lok Sabha Elections

At first glance, the BJP appears to have performed quite poorly in Punjab at the 2024 Lok Sabha election with not a single seat won. And yet, it in fact managed to double its vote share from 9% in 2019 to 18% in 2024. This is a remarkable result given that this was the first time since 1996 that the BJP contested an election alone without its traditional regional ally, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), with whom the BJP had formed state-level governments on several occasions since the late 1990s.

Post-poll surveys reveal that the BJP consolidated its vote share among upper-caste urban Hindus, its traditional vote base, winning 56% of the upper-caste Hindu vote. In contrast, the BJP won only 15% of the farmers' vote (Kumar, 2024). This low support from the farming community is the result of how prime minister Modi five years ago had managed to antagonize and alienate virtually all of Punjab's farmers by introducing new farm laws that were hugely unpopular in Punjab, a theme that we return to later. In 2024, more than half of Punjab's farmers voted for the AAP that won three seats, while the INC won seven seats thanks to stronger support from OBCs and Dalit Sikhs.² The SAD, historically a Sikh party representing the interests of the dominant landowning agrarian caste, was routed and secured only one seat. As we elaborate on later, the relative electoral vacuum left by the SAD was filled by more radical elements campaigning on a platform of Sikh separatism and winning two seats in the Lok Sabha.

Punjab's socio-political context

Although Punjab is demographically a small state, it is politically very significant because of its location as a sensitive border region adjacent to Pakistan. In addition, the Sikhs have, since the 19th century, engaged in different forms of political assertion that have at times resulted in conflicts with the rulers in Delhi.³

Punjab's political spectrum includes movements and parties of all shades, ranging from the far left – the Maoist Naxalites, for instance, were an important political force in the 1970s – to Sikh nationalists or Panthic politics, one radical expression of which

1 *Panth* refers to the Sikh community and Panthic politics to Sikh politics, particularly its ethno-nationalist expressions. Neo-Panthic refers to a new generation of Sikh radicals, many of which emerged on social media to fill the void left by mainstream parties and leaders. The best known of them is Amritpal Singh, discussed below.

2 <https://m.thewire.in/article/politics/farmer-anger-hurt-bjp-northern-states-lokniti>

3 Parts of the argument developed below are based on already published or forthcoming material by the authors (Moliner, 2011, *forthcoming*).

is the Khalistan movement.⁴ In terms of mainstream political parties, Punjab politics includes the regional SAD, founded in the 1920s and claiming to represent both the interests of the Sikh community and of the state of Punjab as a whole. Among its key demands has been more autonomy vis-a-vis the central government. National parties such as the INC, the BJP and AAP are also present, with the latter party currently heading the state government.

The above-mentioned complex majority-minority situation has been important in shaping Punjab politics and Hindu-Sikh relations both within and beyond the state. Since Punjab was created as a Sikh-majority state in 1966, Hindus have been in a minority there. The majoritarian complex of inferiority of Hindus vis-à-vis Muslims, analyzed by Jaffrelot (1996) as one of the core dimensions of Hindutva rhetoric, takes a particular salience among Punjabi Hindus: their demographic anxiety and politics of fear do not target Muslims (whose numbers in Punjab are negligible since partition), but Sikhs. According to scholar Pritam Singh, Punjabi Hindus suffer from a minority persecution complex in the state and a majority complex in the country as a whole, while Sikhs stand in a diametrically opposite situation (Singh, 1982). For Sikhs, who are a tiny religious minority at the national scale, their minority persecution complex in turn results in a very strong attachment to Punjab. Both sides of these minority-majority dynamics mirror and reinforce each other.

To understand why Punjab is such a difficult terrain for Hindutva forces, one needs to examine the colonial roots of Hindu nationalism here, as well as Sikh responses to it. Of particular significance are the fierce 19th century controversies that arose around Sikh identity and its relation to Hinduism between the socio-religious reform movements of the Arya Samaj and the Singh Sabha. In brief, the Arya Samaj argued that Sikhism was merely a branch of Hinduism, and this claim, in turn, accelerated the Singh Sabha's redefinition of Sikh identity as separate and distinct from Hinduism (Jones, 1973).

The role assigned to Sikhs in the Hindu nationalist ideological framework as it took shape from the 1920s is clearly articulated in Hindu nationalist ideologue V.D. Savarkar's writings, to whom Sikhs are 'natural Hindus', fully part of the Hindu nation.⁵ To him, conceding a separate identity to Sikhs would only endanger the desired Hindu unity and weaken them vis-à-vis threatening 'others' (Muslims and Christians). Since then, Hindu nationalism has developed a two-pronged strategy with respect to the Sikhs. On the one hand, and in line with their view of Sikhs as natural Hindus, it tries to forcibly incorporate Sikhs into the Hindu nationalist project by portraying

4 A Sikh separatist movement which emerged in the late 1970s to establish an independent Sikh state, before being crushed by the Indian state in the 1990s. It became – and remains – popular among some sections of the Sikh diaspora, following Blue Star, the bloody army operation launched in Punjab by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the anti-Sikh pogroms in Delhi, in the wake of her assassination by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984.

5 <https://caravanmagazine.in/religion/rss-threat-sikh-assertion-farmer-protests-savarkar-golwalkar>

them as the sword arm of Hinduism in the struggle against Islam. On the other hand, it may brand Sikhs who resist those attempts at incorporation and/or who actively oppose the BJP, as anti-national forces threatening the unity of the Hindu nation. The Sangh Parivar has intensified its efforts at forcibly assimilating Sikhs especially when Punjab has been governed by SAD-BJP coalitions (1997–2002 and 2007–2017), invoking a rhetoric of Sikh-Hindu brotherhood (Shani, 2007, pp. 73–77). They also launched an organization, the Rashtriya Sikh Sangat, to propagate among the Sikh masses the idea that they belonged to the Hindu fold.⁶ Another dimension of Hindutva's politics of assimilation of the Sikhs consists in the rewriting/distortion of Sikh history to project the community precisely as the sword arm of the Hindu nation. The official commemorations of selected Sikh martyrs and historical figures have served as the prime space for such historical revisionism and assimilationist efforts, an example of which is the saffronization of the commemoration of the ninth Sikh Guru's martyrdom, organized on a grand scale at the Red Fort in Delhi by the BJP central government in 2022.⁷

Sikhs as anti-nationals: the Kisan Andolan

The second Hindutva strategy toward the Sikhs, and especially those who openly resist its assimilationist outreach, consists of aggressively projecting them as anti-nationals and terrorists, by mechanically invoking the spectre of Khalistan separatism. This has been the recent dominant response of the BJP's IT cell to the abovementioned farmers' movement against the introduction of a new central legislation concerning farming and the trade of agricultural produces in 2020–2021. This movement, in which Punjabi farmers played a key role, was met with an array of coercive measures by the BJP central government, including the deployment of the police, charges of sedition and arrest warrants for thousands of protesters, as well as a sustained and particularly vicious media campaign defaming the protesters, projecting them variously as Khalistani or Naxalites (Moliner and Singh, 2024). Vigilante violence perpetrated by Hindu nationalist groups was also used. One important outcome of the farmers' movement has been to strengthen and mainstream anti-Hindutva politics in Punjab, thanks to a unique convergence of socio-political forces staunchly resisting the BJP (Singh, 2022). Traditionally viewed as antagonistic, the Punjabi Left and Sikh nationalists entered into a strategic alliance, united by their common opposition to the ruling party's authoritarian, neoliberal and centralizing agenda and its vision of turning the country into a Hindu Rashtra (Kalra, 2024).

One of the most striking political reconfigurations in Punjab produced by the farmers' movement is undoubtedly the 2022 State Legislative Assembly elections that saw the

6 For further discussion of the threat posed by Hindu nationalism to Sikhism as a separate religion, see previous publication by the authors (Moliner, 2011) and Singh and Shani (2021).

7 <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/legacy-guru-teg-bahadar-sikh-guru-1940109-2022-04-21>

former allies SAD and BJP reduced to a mere five seats in an assembly of 117, while the new entry AAP made an almost clean sweep. In this regard, the 2022 election marked the decline of the hegemonic position of the landed elite that had governed Punjab for the past 50 years (Jodhka, 2022). However, Modi's repeal of the farm laws is also noteworthy because it is strategically linked, according to Pritam Singh, to the framing of a counter-offensive by the BJP aimed at 'making comprehensive efforts to capture power in Punjab, where it has historically been a small player' and to 'create a pro-BJP government in Punjab with the BJP as the dominant party, instead of being a minority partner as it was in the Akali [SAD]/BJP coalition'.⁸ This strategy led the BJP to ally with former chief minister Amarinder Singh's Punjab Lok Congress, and won it the active support of certain sections of the Sikh elite, including former SAD leader and ex-president of the Delhi Gurdwara Management Committee, Manjinder Singh Sirsa, who has recently become a Delhi government minister in the new BJP government. This strategy of forging new alliances in Punjab was evident both in the 2022 and 2024 elections. Yet in both, the legacy of the farmers' movements and its extended network of farm unions have constituted the most significant obstacle to the BJP's inroad attempts in Punjab. These unions collectively campaigned against the BJP, calling for a boycott of its candidates and urging voters to vote otherwise.⁹ The attempt by the Central government in November 2024 to reintroduce some elements of the three contentious farm laws through the back door, with the draft National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing (NPFAM), has raised the concern of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha, the umbrella farm organization, which launched rallies and protest actions in the following weeks and months.¹⁰ This farmers' agitation and the way Punjab and Central governments manage it will significantly impact BJP's future inroads in the state.

Neo-Panthic politics and weaponized Hindutva: a script for the future?

In this post-farmers' movement political context, the BJP and Hindutva politics have become intimately tied to the unexpected revival of neo-Panthic and Sikh radical politics, and to the politics of the imagined 'Khalistan threat' to the Hindu nation propagated by the BJP. Indeed, over the past few years, the steep rise in Sikh radical politics and the emergence of a new generation of self-proclaimed Sikh preachers and religious leaders has occurred in tandem with the further radicalization and weaponization of Hindutva in Punjab and abroad,¹¹ visible in how several Sikh separatists on Canadian

8 <https://thewire.in/politics/dont-be-fooled-bjps-counter-offensive-against-farmers-is-very-much-still-on>

9 <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/punjab-haryana-farmers-block-bjp-candidates-9325559/>

10 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/farm-unions-say-new-draft-agri-marketing-policy-is-more-dangerous-than-repealed-farm-laws/article69058753.ece>

11 <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/punjab-elections-2024-victory-khalistan-radicals-amritpal-singh-sarabjit-khalsa-voter-disillusionment/article68253849.ece>

and American soil have been the targets of sometimes-successful assassination attempts involving Indian official agents.¹²

The more radical and communal forms of neo-Panthic politics have started to fill the vacuum created by the decline of the SAD – the moderate wing of Panthic politics – and the now declining popularity of AAP. These radical groups and individuals appeal to collective fears among Sikhs about conversions of Sikhs to Christianity (a recurrent theme they share with Hindu right-wing groups such as the RSS, Shiv Sena and Bajrang Dal who are also involved in anti-Christian activities in Punjab),¹³ and effectively politicize the use of accusations of sacrilege or disrespect (*beadbi*) against Sikhs and Sikhism. But they have also mobilized around more substantial social issues such as the economic costs and consequences of the considerable emigration from Punjab, the stagnation in the agrarian economy, and widespread drug problems among Punjab's youth.¹⁴ As all-encompassing answers to those issues, they unsurprisingly advocate enhanced moral policing of society and the defense of the sacrosanct Sikh identity. A well-known example of this form of radical politics is Amritpal Singh, a self-proclaimed Sikh religious preacher who became famous in September 2022 thanks to his campaigns against drug abuse among the youth, and for promoting religious orthodoxy through his attempts to revive Sikh baptism.¹⁵ He is equally famous, however, for his hate speech against the Christian community, and for his more radical calls for the creation of a separate Sikh nation. His career seemed to have ended in 2023 when he spent 35 days on the run from the authorities who alleged that he had links with Pakistani intelligence and with global Khalistan terror groups. Amritpal Singh was eventually arrested, but in a surprising turn of events he filed a nomination for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, campaigned from his prison cell, and got elected as independent from the Khadoor Sahib constituency, a former SAD stronghold. The son of the assassin of former Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi, Sarabjit Singh Khalsa, also got elected as an independent candidate, promising to raise the *beadbi* issue in Parliament and wage a war on drugs. The two have since launched their own political platform, the Akali Dal (Waris Punjab De).¹⁶

The main beneficiary of these reconfigurations in Panthic politics, however, is most certainly the BJP. Commentator Jatinder Kaur Tur has, for example, documented

12 The assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Canadian citizen involved in Sikh separatist groups, on Canadian soil in 2023 had provoked a diplomatic row between India and Canada after Canadian authorities alleged that Indian officials were involved in this killing.

13 <https://www.newsclick.in/attacks-punjab-christians-increase-allegations-conversion>

14 On the crisis of the agrarian economy in Punjab, see Bansal (2020), Jodhka (2006) and Dhesi and Singh (2008) and on the drug addiction issue, see Verma (2017).

15 Amrit Sanskar is the ceremony of initiation into the Khalsa order, instituted by the 10th Sikh Guru. Amritdhari Sikhs, who have undergone it, represent the orthodox version of Sikhism.

16 <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/shiromani-akali-dal-punjab-waris-punjab-de-amritpal-singh-jarnail-singh-bhindranwale-khalistan/article69108744.ece>

the RSS connections of Amritpal Singh's campaign manager,¹⁷ while Harjeshwar Pal Singh argues that 'the increase in the vote percentage of BJP for the first time in Punjab and the victory of two candidates with radical Sikh views after many years is a new sign in the politics of Punjab. Communalism on both sides strengthens each other. BJP can scare the Hindu votes by projecting the fear of Khalistan.'¹⁸ While we are partially sympathetic to this line of argumentation, we also see some continuities in the politics of Hindutva and the BJP which does not exclusively seek to antagonize and polarize the electorate along Hindu-Sikh lines, but which also to a degree continues the earlier politics of assimilation and absorption. The continuation of this dual strategy leads to a complex task allocation between the different branches of the Sangh Parivar's extended network, what Jaffrelot (2005) called the 'division of labour'. On the one hand, fringe groups in the Punjab such as the Shiv Sena – who have no connection to the political parties in Maharashtra bearing the same name – and the RSS are tasked with inciting communal tensions with Sikh radical groups, through overtly provocative statements and actions. In the wake of clashes between Hindu and Sikh groups in May 2022, a journalistic investigation report found that there are as many as 15 homegrown Shiv Senas in the state.¹⁹ These groups almost exclusively target the supposed threat posed by the Khalistan movement. At the same time, the national and state-level leadership of the BJP pursue a 'softer' agenda of absorption and assimilation of Sikhs to Hinduism. This dual agenda is a good illustration of what Palshikar called the 'confusion between the mainstream and the fringe' (2019, p. 112). In Punjab, however, this dual and oscillating strategy on the part of Hindutva organizations is both intentional and conscious as it appeals to different segments of the population. Retaining this strategy and keeping strong anti-Sikh narratives at checks locally is vital because, on the ground, the economic and class interests of the Hindu urban trading community in Punjab are not fundamentally antagonistic to those of the Sikh landed peasantry (Singh, 2008).

Conclusion

We have argued in this article that Hindutva's future in Punjab is an insecure and compromised one. This has historical reasons and pertains to the conflictual relations that Punjab, the only Sikh-majority state in the Indian union, has entertained with representatives of the Central government. This had led to a dual agenda developed by the forces of Hindutva to absorb the Sikhs into the Hindu fold and simultaneously project this religious minority as (yet) another threat to the cohesion of the Hindu majoritarian nation. The more recent trajectory of and transformations in Hindutva

17 <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/amritpal-singh-election-khadoor-sahib-2024vvvvvv>

18 <https://www.newslaundry.com/2024/09/02/rebellion-rise-in-radical-sikh-politics-inside-the-akali-dals-existential-crisis>

19 <https://theprint.in/india/patiala-clash-highlights-punjab-many-shiv-senas-no-political-weight-but-not-to-be-ignored/939959/>

in Punjab have relied specifically on further religious polarization and radicalization, a conscious division of labor between mainstream and fringe Hindu right-wing groups and an intimate intertwinement with the revival of radical Sikh politics. This raises important questions concerning what alternative oppositional forces may be capable of checking the further consolidation of Hindutva. Here, we can almost certainly rule out the new forms of neo-Panthic and radical Sikh politics described above, insofar as they mobilize an aggressive discourse of ‘an existential threat’ to a beleaguered Sikh identity, mirroring some of the fears and anxieties found in Hindutva rhetoric. But despite the limited electoral appeal of neo-Panthic groups, the spectre of Khalistan remains a potent symbolic resource for Hindutva forces. Its utility lies not in actual secessionist threats but in its ability to mobilize Hindu anxieties, justify coercive governance, and delegitimize any form of dissent (including dissenting farmer unions) as ‘anti-national’.

In other parts of India, regional parties have offered important pushback against Hindutva’s centralizing and authoritarian agenda. Although this is also a crucial political dynamic in Punjab, the SAD is currently embroiled in internal conflicts over succession. It has also lost touch with emerging concerns within the agrarian economy and does not at present appear capable of championing regional identity and aspirations in any persuasive way, nor does it appear as a strong advocate of the principles of federalism that are currently under pressure from the BJP central government.²⁰ The scope of centrist parties like the INC or the AAP to offer viable alternatives also seems to have considerably shrunk, particularly following the defeat of AAP at the recent Delhi Legislative Assembly elections that seems to question the long-term viability of the party as an electoral force. Perhaps the most likely alternative can be found in grassroots and subaltern movements such as the farmers’ movement challenging the farm laws, and its leftist unions’ leadership that ensured political solidarities were established across the lines of castes, while also bringing farmers and laborers onto a shared, although often shaky, political platform. The fact that this work still continues at the current troubled political moment provides ground for optimism.

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20 <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/sad-faces-a-crisis-of-legitimacy/>

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