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## Role of Religion in Electoral Politics of Punjab

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16811996>

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 25-07-2025

**Published:** 10-08-2025

#### Keywords:

*religion, communities, identity, alliance, electoral, coalition*

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### ABSTRACT

Understanding the role of religion in Punjab politics is essential not only for grasping the state's unique political journey but also for addressing broader democratic questions in India. In an age of rising religious nationalism, populist rhetoric, polarization and Punjab stands at a crossroads—between religious mobilization and secular aspiration, between transformation and tradition. This paper endeavors to critically examine this tension, offering insights into how religion functions as both a unifying and divisive force in the political life of Punjab. This paper aims to explore the complex role of religion in Punjab politics by examining three core dimensions. First, it analyzes the historical and institutional relationship between religious organizations and political entities, especially focusing on Sikh religious bodies and their political influence. Second, it examines how religious identity influences electoral behavior through a study of election data, voter surveys, and campaign narratives. Third, it investigates the interaction between religion, ethnicity, caste, and regionalism, which often overlap and compete in Punjab's socio-political fabric.

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**Introduction:** Religion has been a key force in shaping the political landscape of Punjab, a region whose history is marked by deep intertwinement of faith and governance. Punjab occupies a unique place in Indian political history due to its religious composition, socio-political movements, and its centrality to the Sikh faith. With a population dominated by Sikhs, followed by significant Hindu and smaller Muslim and Christian communities, Punjab offers a rare case study of how religious identity shapes political



ideologies, party structures, and voting patterns.<sup>1</sup> The centrality of religion in Punjab politics is neither recent nor superficial. The roots can be traced back to the colonial period when British administrative policies institutionalized communal divisions through separate electorates and religiously based representation.<sup>2</sup> Post-Partition migration in 1947 created a significant demographic transformation in Punjab, turning what was once a religiously diverse province into a Sikh-majority state. This shift solidified the connection between Sikh religious leadership and political representation. The Shiromani Akali Dal, often referred to as the political wing of Sikhism, has historically drawn its legitimacy not just from electoral politics but from its deep ties with Sikh institutions like the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and the Akal Takht Sahib.<sup>3</sup>

Despite India's constitutional commitment to secularism, religion continues to function as a key axis of political mobilization in Punjab. Political parties actively appeal to religious sentiments, often deploying religious symbols and language to win voter loyalty. This religious framing is particularly pronounced during election campaigns, where religious identities and institutions are mobilized not just as cultural symbols but as electoral tools.<sup>4</sup> Whether it is the promise to protect the Sikh "panthic" identity, the invocation of martyrdom, or religious events like Nagar Kirtans and Ardas rallies, religious performativity in politics is a consistent feature of Punjab's public sphere.

The importance of religion in Punjab politics also manifests in voter behavior. Scholars have observed that voting decisions in Punjab are significantly shaped by religious identity, often superseding other considerations such as class or even caste.<sup>5</sup> For instance, electoral support for the SAD has traditionally been strongest in rural areas where religious institutions maintain a dominant presence in social and cultural life. However, this alignment has evolved over time, especially with the rise of newer parties like the Aam Aadmi Party, which challenge the religious-political monopoly of traditional actors by appealing to secular, anti-corruption, and governance-based narratives.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of this study extends beyond Punjab. In a country like ours, featured by deep religious pluralism and periodic communal tensions—the Punjab model raises fundamental questions about the limits of secularism, the risks of religious nationalism, and the possibilities of religious coexistence. Punjab serves as both a cautionary tale and a site of resistance: cautionary due to the history of militancy in the 1980s that resulted in severe state violence and human rights abuses; resistant in its enduring farmer movements that often invoke religious and moral frameworks as a basis for collective political action<sup>7</sup>.



**Historical Background:** To understand the role of religion in Punjab's politics, it is mandatory to trace the historical evolution of religious identity in the region and its intersection with political institutions. Punjab, which is known as 'land of five rivers,' has for centuries been a melting pot of diverse religious traditions, primarily Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism, each contributing to the region's socio-political fabric. However, with the emergence of Sikhism in the 15th century under Sikh gurus, Punjab witnessed the rise of a religious identity that would later form the cornerstone of its political mobilization. From colonial administrative structures to the post-Partition reorganization of Indian states, religious identity has remained a consistent and often dominant theme in the political history of Punjab. The British administration played an important role in formalizing and institutionalizing religious divisions in Indian politics. In Punjab, this took the form of the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900, which divided communities into agricultural and non-agricultural castes, often along religious lines. These classifications not only influenced landholding patterns but also had long-term political implications, privileging certain groups particularly the Sikh and Muslim Jat peasants over others. Moreover, the Government of India Act of 1919 and later the Government of India Act of 1935 introduced separate electorates based on religion, further reinforcing communal identities in political life.

In the early 20th century, religious organizations such as the Central Sikh League and Shiromani Akali Dal emerged not only as socio-religious bodies but as entities with distinct political agendas. These organizations often merged religious reform with political demands, including autonomy for Sikh institutions and participation in legislative processes etc. During this period, the Gurdwara Reform Movement gained momentum, aiming to wrest control of Gurdwaras from government-aligned mahants or corrupt mahants and return them to the community under the governance of the SGPC. This movement led to the close intertwining of religious authority and political mobilization in Sikh society.

**Partition of India and Demographic Transformation:** The Partition in 1947 marked an important moment in Punjab's history. The province of Punjab, then undivided and religiously plural, was split between India and Pakistan. The demographic consequences were amazing: approximately 13 million people were displaced, and millions were killed in communal violence. The western part of Punjab, now in Pakistan, became overwhelmingly Muslim, while Indian Punjab emerged as a Sikh-majority state for the first time in history. This demographic shift had profound political implications. Firstly, it gave the Sikhs in Indian Punjab a new sense of numerical strength and political leverage. Secondly, it removed Muslims from the political equation in Indian Punjab who had previously played a balancing role in pre-Partition politics. In the immediate post-independence period, the Sikh leadership began demanding safeguards for religious and cultural identity within the Indian Union. However, their early demands for



autonomy were met with suspicion, especially in the context of rising nationalism and the trauma of Partition.

In the post-independence era, the Indian government undertook linguistic reorganization of states, culminating in the States Reorganisation Act of 1956. However, Punjab remained a multilingual state, including areas where Punjabi and Hindi were both spoken. This led to the Punjabi Suba Movement, launched primarily by the Shiromani Akali Dal, demanding a Punjabi-speaking state with a Sikh cultural core. Although framed as a linguistic demand, the movement had clear religious undertones, as the new leadership saw the creation of a Punjabi Suba as a means to consolidate political power and protect religious identity.

After much resistance from the Indian State, Punjab was finally reorganized in 1966, leading to the creation of Himachal Pradesh and Haryana and leaving Punjab as a Sikh-majority state. This victory emboldened the SAD and reinforced the belief that religious identity could be used to make political demands in a democratic setup. In the following decades, the Shiromani Akali Dal emerged as the main political channel for articulating Sikh concerns, although internal factionalism and competition with national parties like the INC remained constant. The most problematic period in the political history of Punjab came during the 1980s, when religious politics escalated into militancy. Dissatisfaction over unfulfilled promises, the marginalization of Sikh political voices, and perceived economic and cultural neglect gave rise to radical movements. The leadership of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who was promoted by moderate Akalis and the Congress to counter rivals, evolved into a separatist campaign demanding a sovereign Sikh state.

After that, the 1990s and 2000s marked a period of recovery and relative stabilization. The decline of militancy allowed mainstream parties, including the Akali Dal and the Congress, to regain ground. However, the religious discourse never entirely disappeared. The Declaration of 1996 in Moga by the Shiromani Akali Dal reaffirmed the party's commitment to panthic issues, even as it sought broader alliances and coalition politics. During this period, the Akali Dal also began engaging in alliances with the BJP, a Hindu nationalist party. This partnership created both strategic benefits and ideological tensions, especially as panthic identity occasionally clashed with the BJP's Hindutva politics. Meanwhile, new political actors began to emerge such as the Aam Aadmi Party in the 2010s offering secular governance based alternatives to the religion heavy narratives of traditional parties.

**Religious Identity and Voting Behavior:** Religious identity has been one of the most significant determinants of voting behavior in Punjab since the formation of the modern Indian state. Unlike many



Indian states where caste and class dominate electoral preferences, in Punjab, religion particularly Sikh identity has consistently structured voter choices, party loyalties, and political mobilization. Although recent elections suggest a possible dilution of religious voting patterns, the historical and empirical evidence affirms that religion remains a potent political force. Throughout much of the 20th century, SAD maintained a strong electoral base among rural Sikh voters, especially in the Malwa and Doaba regions.

Surveys and electoral data from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) suggest that between 60–70% of Sikh voters supported SAD during key elections from the 1980s through the early 2000s.<sup>8</sup> Shromani Akali Dal's election campaign slogans frequently invoked religious themes such as 'Panth di Jeet', and their manifestos often included demands like increased autonomy for Punjab, justice for 1984 riot victims, and protection of Sikh rights under Article 25 of the Constitution. However, SAD's appeal among Sikhs has been mediated by sectarian divides, including the Ravidassia, Nirankari, and Dalit Sikh sub-groups, some of whom have felt excluded by the mainstream Akali narrative. This sectarian differentiation has increasingly fractured the Sikh vote bank, leading to a more nuanced understanding of religious identity as plural and contested rather than monolithic.

The Hindu population in Punjab about 38% as per the 2011 Census has traditionally aligned itself with the Congress and, more recently, with the BJP in urban centers like Amritsar, Ludhiana and Jalandhar. During the early post-independence decades, Congress enjoyed significant support from Hindu voters because of its secular appeal and association with national integration. However, starting in the 1990s, the BJP began expanding its base among Hindu traders, professionals, and upper-caste groups, partly through appeals to Hindutva ideology.

The SAD-BJP alliance (1997-2020) was a strategic electoral arrangement where SAD would consolidate the Sikh rural vote while BJP secured urban Hindu support. This method delivered successive victories for the alliance, including in the 1997 and 2007 assembly elections. The coalition enabled religious identities to operate synergistically in an electoral context, reinforcing religious boundaries even as it promoted inter-religious political cooperation. However, this alliance also brought inherent contradictions to the surface. For example, while the SAD demanded justice for the 1984 anti-Sikh riots and greater federalism, the BJP's nationalistic posture undercut these demands. Tensions between Sikh-specific issues and broader Hindu nationalist ideology created fault lines that eventually resulted to the breakdown of the alliance in 2020 following the farmers' protest and Akali Dal's decision to oppose the BJP-led central government's farm laws.



The Punjab Legislative Assembly elections 2012 presented an important moment in religious-political alignment. The SAD-BJP coalition returned to power despite anti-incumbency, largely due to SAD's strong rural network and religious mobilization efforts. However, voter surveys indicated early signs of dissatisfaction among Dalit Sikhs, who felt increasingly alienated from the dominant Jat Sikh leadership of SAD.

The 2017 elections, however, marked a turning point. The entry of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) reshaped the traditional religious voting blocs. AAP's appeal to corruption-free governance, combined with its strong performance in the Malwa region, attracted a substantial section of the Sikh youth, especially first-time voters disillusioned with SAD's leadership and scandals.<sup>9</sup> AAP's strategy was notably secular and issue-based, in contrast to the religious symbolism heavy campaigns of SAD. In this election, SAD suffered one of its worst defeats, winning only 15 of 117 seats, while AAP became the principal opposition with 20 seats. The Congress won a sweeping 77 seats by adopting a 'soft secularism' strategy reaching out to both Sikh and Hindu communities while avoiding overt religious appeals.<sup>10</sup>

This shift indicated a significant erosion of religious vote banking, especially among the Sikh electorate, many of whom were increasingly concerned with governance, unemployment, and agrarian distress rather than religious identity alone.

The 2022 Punjab Assembly elections further disrupted the religious-political axis. AAP won a massive mandate, securing 92 out of 117 seats, a historic victory that cut across religious and caste lines. Exit polls revealed that AAP received support from roughly 37.5% of Sikh voters and over 39% of Hindu voters that was a significant break from historical voting patterns. AAP's success can be attributed to many factors like education, healthcare, and anti-corruption, a charismatic leadership in Bhagwant Mann, a Sikh but with a secular image, the perception of both Congress and SAD as corrupt, dynastic, and religiously polarizing. Although Aam Aadmi Party did not completely avoid religious engagement as it fielded Sikh candidates in key constituencies and participated in cultural-religious events and its campaign rhetoric stayed focused on governance and "badlav" (change) rather than religious identity.<sup>11</sup> This outcome suggests a weakening of religious determinism in voting behavior, at least in the short term. However, analysts caution against overestimating this secular shift, noting that sectarian loyalties remain latent and may reemerge depending on political narratives and national events.

**The Role of Religious Institutions and Voter Mobilization:** Beyond party campaigns, religious institutions like the SGPC and Dera leaders continue to wield significant influence over voter preferences, especially in rural Punjab. Religious Deras such as Radha Soami Satsang Beas, Dera Sacha



Sauda, and Dera Baba Nanak command large followings and often make electoral endorsements. These endorsements can swing close races, particularly in Dalit dominated constituencies .

For instance, in the 2007 elections, Dera Sacha Sauda's support for the Congress was widely seen as a key factor in its improved performance in certain regions. However, such endorsements also provoke sectarian backlash. The SGPC and mainstream Sikh leadership have, at times, condemned Dera support for non-Akali candidates, viewing it as a betrayal of panthic unity. Thus, religious identity in Punjab's voting behavior is not merely about individual belief but also shaped by institutional influence, communal endorsement, and perceived alignment with religious orthodoxy. The political history and contemporary electoral dynamics of Punjab clearly demonstrate the enduring, albeit evolving, role of religion in shaping the state's politics. Religion, specially Sikhism, has functioned as both an ideological foundation and an institutional framework for political expression, organization, and conflict. From the colonial codification of religious identities and communal electorates to the formation of religiously based political parties like the Shiromani Akali Dal , the story of Punjab's political development is inseparable from its religious consciousness .

This above analysis has shown that religion in Punjab is not simply a matter of individual faith but is embedded in the institutional architecture of politics. The role of religious bodies such as the SGPC and the strategic use of religious rhetoric in electoral campaigns highlight how religion is used for political gain. The cooperation between religious and political leadership in Sikh-majority areas, particularly in rural constituencies, has historically delivered significant electoral dividends to religious parties. However, this close association has not been without consequences. The period of militancy in the 1980s, triggered by both legitimate demands for autonomy and reactionary religious nationalism, illustrated how politicized religion could spiral into violent conflict. One of the most significant findings of this paper is the gradual shift in voting behavior away from religious affiliation toward issue-based considerations. The rise of new political actors like the Aam Aadmi Party , particularly in the 2017 and 2022 elections, suggests that a section of Punjab's electorate is increasingly prioritizing issues like anti-corruption, governance and public service delivery over religious symbolism . This transition, while still incomplete, signals a potential secularization of political engagement in the state, at least among younger and urban voters. Nevertheless, religion remains a latent political force. Institutions such as Deras and sect-specific leaders continue to wield notable influence, especially in Dalit and rural constituencies. Moreover, religious appeals continue to surface during elections, whether subtly in manifestos or overtly in campaign speeches and religious events. This suggests that while overt religious polarization may be less



effective than it once was, religion still serves as a dominant device for community mobilization and emotional connection.

The implications of these findings are important for Indian democracy as a whole. Punjab offers a lens through which to study how religious identity can be both democratizing and divisive. On the one hand, it has authorised marginalized communities to organize politically and assert cultural autonomy. On the other, it has also been used to rule out, radicalize, and polarize populations, sometimes at great cost to democratic stability and community cohesion.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

**Electoral Reforms:** Some reforms can be introduced to regulate the use of religious symbols and rhetoric during election campaigns. The Election Commission should strictly enforce existing laws that prohibit the politicization of religion under Section 123(3) of the Representation of the People Act.

**Strengthening Secular Institutions:** Greater emphasis should be placed on the autonomy and accountability of public institutions such as education institutions, law enforcement, and electoral commissions, to ensure that religion does not unduly influence policy or administration.

**Educational Outreach:** Civic education promoting constitutional secularism, democratic values, pluralism should be expanded, especially in rural and youth demographics where religious-political mobilization remains high.

**Role of Religious Institutions:** Rather than viewing religious institutions as adversaries to secular governance, the state should develop channels of dialogue and cooperation to foster inclusive development and interfaith understanding.

In conclusion, religion in Punjab politics is neither fading nor fixed; it is being restructured in response to evolving socio-political contexts. While electoral tendencies suggest a cautious move away from religious determinism, the deep historical entrenchment of religion in Punjab's political institutions means that its influence is likely to persist in refined forms. The challenge for Punjab and indeed for India is to ensure that religion continues to enrich cultural identity without compromising the democratic principles of equality, pluralism, and secular governance.



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