

ELECTORAL DYNAMICS IN PUNJAB: A STUDY OF 2024 BY-ELECTIONS IN PUNJAB

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India is the world's largest democracy. It is founded on the principles of free and fair elections, constitutional governance, public participation, and the rule of law. Elections are thus, the means through which political power changes hands in the country. In this context, by-elections are also important in a democratic polity like India. They reflect the political stresses and strains within the system. They also indicate changes in party alignments and political fortunes. The main objective of by-elections is to fill vacant seats in time and ensure representation of the concerned constituency in the legislature. By-elections are held when a seat becomes vacant due to the death, resignation, disqualification, or expulsion of a sitting member. In Indian constitution, Section 151A of the Representation of the People Act 1951 mandates the Election Commission to fill the casual vacancies in the houses of Parliament and State legislatures through by-elections within six months from the date of occurrence of the vacancy, provided that the remainder of the term of a member is one year or more. It is pertinent to mention here that there is no need to hold by-elections if the remaining term of the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha is less than one year from the date of occurrence of vacancies.¹

What is more, by-elections are often served as litmus test for political parties and their popularity. They provide an opportunity for parties to gauge public sentiment and assess their support base. By-election outcomes can affect the majority of the ruling government. If the party loses a significant number of by-poll seats, it may lead to a loss of majority in the legislative body, which can impact the government's stability and decision making. Moreover, by-elections provide an avenue for political parties to test their electoral strategies and finetune their campaign approaches. Parties may experiment with candidate selection, campaign themes, and messaging during by-polls, which can influence their strategies in subsequent elections.

The political atmosphere in Punjab has long been a complex interplay of regional aspirations, national party dynamics and deeply entrenched social realities. In this intricate web, by-elections often serve as a crucial barometer, offer insights into shifting voter sentiments and the performance of incumbent governments. The by-elections for four Assembly constituencies—Dera Baba Nanak, Chabbewal, Gidderbaha, and Barnala—held on 20 November, 2024 were no exception. Coming on the heels of the 2024 Lok Sabha general elections, which saw a significant mandate for the Indian National Congress (INC) and a drubbing for the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), these by-elections were viewed as a critical litmus test for the Bhagwant Mann-led AAP government. The results announced on November 23, 2024, provided a fascinating and nuanced picture. While the AAP managed to reclaim three of the four seats, the Congress secured a significant victory in Barnala, a constituency considered an AAP bastion. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Shiromani Akali Dal (B) were left licking their wounds, failed to secure a single seat, which further underscored their diminished political clout in the state. This article delves into the intricate details of the November 2024 by-elections, offering a comprehensive analysis of the campaigns, the key candidates, the voting patterns, factional politics, dynastic politics and the profound political implications for Punjab's future.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BY-ELECTIONS:

To understand the significance of the November 2024 by-elections, it is important to know the political backdrop against which they were held. The by-elections were necessitated after the sitting MLAs from these four constituencies were elected to the Lok Sabha in the 2024 general elections. The constituencies and the reasons for the by-elections were as follows. The Dera Baba Nanak Assembly seat fell vacant after Congress MLA Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa won the Gurdaspur Lok Sabha constituency. Similarly, the Chabbewal seat was vacated by Dr. Raj Kumar Chabbewal, who had switched from the Congress to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and was elected as the Member of Parliament from Hoshiarpur. The Gidderbaha seat became vacant following the election of Congress MLA Amrinder Singh Raja Warring to the Lok Sabha from Ludhiana. Likewise, the Barnala Assembly constituency fell vacant after AAP MLA Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer secured victory from the Sangrur parliamentary constituency.

The timing of these by-elections was particularly crucial. The 2024 Lok Sabha elections had delivered a rude shock to the AAP. Despite being the incumbent state government with a massive majority, the party managed to win only three of the thirteen Lok Sabha seats. This was a significant decline from the gains they had made in the 2022 assembly elections. The Congress, on the other hand, had emerged as the single largest party, secured seven seats, while the SAD won a lone seat and the BJP drew a blank.

For the AAP, by-elections were a litmus test for Bhagwant Mann's governmentⁱⁱ, a chance to regain political momentum and demonstrate that the Lok Sabha results were an aberration. It was also important for ruling AAP which aimed to maintain its supremacy after winning of the Jalandhar West bypoll held on July 10, 2024. Moreover, AAP High command strategized the poll campaign keeping in mind these results could work to their advantage ahead of the forthcoming Delhi assembly elections. For the Congress, it offered an opportunity to consolidate their position as the main opposition and prove that their Lok Sabha success was not a fluke. For the BJP, it contested the Lok Sabha elections solo for the first time in decades and secured significant 18.56 percent vote share of the total, saw these by-elections as a chance to establish a permanent foothold in the region. BJP took the byelections seriously due to its victory in Haryana assembly elections held on Oct 5, 2024.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Shiromani Akali Dal (B), a historically dominant regional force, opted out of these by-elections amidst a deepening existential crisis. It is mentioned here that the party previously boycotted the 1992 assembly elections due to security concerns and the era's prevailing militancy^{iv}. In these byelections, the decision for boycott was primarily due to a religious deadlock between party president Sukhbir Singh Badal and the Akal Takht (the highest temporal seat of Sikhism). Similarly, the SAD grAAPling with its poorest electoral performance to date, it faced a tough battle to maintain its political relevance. On August 30, the Akal Takht officially declared Sukhbir Singh Badal 'Tankhaiya' (guilty of religious misconduct) for decisions taken by him that significantly tarnished the image of Sikh community, weakened the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and damaged the Sikh interests. Central to this indictment were his actions as Deputy Chief Minister and party chief between 2007 and 2017, specifically regarding the 2015 *Bargari sacrilege* case and the subsequent police firing. Additionally, his role in facilitating a pardon for Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim in a 2007 blasphemy case was cited as a major betrayal of Sikh interests.

The declaration made by Giani Raghbir Singh on October 23, 2024, created an insurmountable obstacle for the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). Giani Raghbir Singh ruled that a *tankhaiya* could not engage in any political activity until his *tankhah* (religious penance) was both pronounced from the *Faseel (Podium)* of the Akal Takht and fully served. In this way, the Jathedar effectively sealed Sukhbir Singh Badal's immediate political fate. Because the assembly of the five high priests to

determine the punishment was delayed until after Diwali, the religious deadlock remained unresolved past the October 25, 2025 nomination deadline. This timing ultimately forced the SAD chief to abstain from the Gidderbaha bypoll, as the party chose to prioritize adherence to the Akal Takht's authority over electoral participation.^v

However, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) had viewed a potential victory in the Gidderbaha bypoll as a historical catalyst for party revival, drawing parallels to its 1995 triumph in the same seat which paved the way for the party to form the government in 1997. It was projected that the party was prepared to field Sukhbir Singh Badal from this high-stakes constituency in order to repeat the history. It is mentioned here that this constituency was represented for five consecutive terms between 1969 and 1985 by his father and Akali patriarch, Parkash Singh Badal, prior to the elder Badal's shift to the Lambi assembly segment.

After the failure to secure religious relief from the Akal Takht, the Shiromani Akali Dal (B) made the strategic decision not to contest the by-elections for all four assembly segments. However, Giani Raghbir Singh clarified that this withdrawal was a party choice rather than a religious mandate. The Jathedar emphasized that while Sukhbir Singh Badal was strictly prohibited from any political participation due to his *tankhaiya* status, the restriction was person-specific. The SAD(B) as an organization remained eligible to contest. However, as long as the case remained pending before the five high priests, the party president himself was barred from the campaign trail and the ballot. In essence, SAD preferred to abstain entirely from these by-elections.^{vi}

These by-elections in Punjab have once again brought religious communities and influential socio-religious sects (Deras) to the centre stage of politics. Major political parties actively scrambled to secure their backing because these groups have significant populations and historically vote as a unified bloc, giving them the power to decisively swing election outcomes. Since the 2007 state assembly elections, Dera Sacha Sauda has been a formidable political force in Punjab particularly in the rural, Dalit-majority areas of the Malwa region, where most of its followers live. Mainstream parties like the Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal), Congress, and the BJP routinely courted the Dera due to its massive voter mobilization power. Following a recent assembly election in Haryana where Dera followers backed the BJP en bloc (as a whole group), the BJP leadership was confident they could replicate that unified support in Barnala and Gidderbaha. Recognizing the threat, both Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party aggressively reached out to the Dera to dilute the BJP's advantage. In the Dera Baba Nanak constituency, the Christian community has grown into a vital electoral force. Their significant demographic presence has made them key players in shaping the local political narrative, forcing all major contenders to tailor campaigns specifically to their interests. In Chabbewal constituency, the Ravidasia community makes up a substantial portion of Chabbewal's voter base. This community's recent voting behaviour heavily influenced local strategies. During the 2024 general elections, this bloc largely consolidated behind AAP, particularly within the larger Hoshiarpur Parliamentary constituency. Entering the by-elections, maintaining or fracturing this specific alignment became a primary objective for the competing parties.^{vii}

ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE: ASSEMBLY CONSTITUENCY WISE ANALYSIS

Assembly Constituency: Dera Baba Nanak

Party-wise Performance

Candidate	Party	Votes Received	Percentage
Gurdeep Singh	AAP	59104	47.68
Jatinder Kaur Randhawa	INC	53405	43.08

Ravikaran Singh Kahlon	BJP	6505	5.25
Lovepreet Singh Toofan	SAD(A)	2358	1.9

Source: Election Commission of India

The Dera Baba Nanak Assembly Constituency in Punjab's Gurdaspur district is a unique blend of history, politics, and culture. As part of the Gurdaspur Lok Sabha constituency and bordered by the Ravi River and the Pakistan international boundary, its identity is shaped by its strategic and emotional geopolitical position. The region is deeply significant to millions of Sikhs, as it is inherently linked to Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of Sikhism. The town of Dera Baba Nanak is a sacred site for Sikhs, known for its deep connection to Guru Nanak Dev Ji. A key feature of the area is the Kartarpur Corridor, which links Dera Baba Nanak with Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Pakistan. Inaugurated on November 9, 2019, to commemorate the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, this corridor allows Sikh pilgrims to visit the shrine visa-free^{viii}. Historically, the constituency's boundaries have been subject to change. It was once part of the Fatehgarh Churian Assembly Constituency. After the implementation of delimitation exercise in 2008, some polling stations from the now-defunct Dhariwal constituency were incorporated into Dera Baba Nanak AC. Since the dawn of the electoral process in 1952, the constituency has remained a traditional tug-of-war between the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). Leaders from these parties often dominated the electoral landscape, reflecting a traditional political structure. However, the last decade has seen a notable disruption. While the INC held the seat in the 2022 assembly elections, the political tide turned in a subsequent by-election. In 2024, the Aam Aadmi Party secured the seat, signalled a significant shift in voter sentiment and a break from the established two-party dominance. This political evolution highlights the changing preferences of the electorate and the rise of new forces in Punjab's politics.

This constituency witnessed the multi corner contest. The major political parties were the AAP, the INC, the BJP, the SAD (A) and independents. The ruling AAP gave the ticket to Gurdeep Singh Randhawa. It is important to mention here that Gurdeep Singh Randhawa was remained close confident of ex-Deputy CM Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa. He got estranged from Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa on the issue of denial of the ticket for the post of village 'Sarpanch' a few years ago. Despite losing in 2022 assembly elections amidst a state wide the AAP wave, he maintained his influence as the *Halqa Incharge* and Chairman of the Punjab Industries Development Board. The Congress sought to retain the family stronghold by fielding Jatinder Kaur, the wife of MP Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa. The BJP gave ticket to Ravikaran Singh Kahlon, a high-profile defector from the SAD(B) and son of former speaker late Nirmal Singh Kahlon. Ravikaran Singh Kahlon brought a strong local legacy and had a stronghold in the DBN constituency. This was the fact that Ravikaran Singh Kahlon got defeated from INC candidate Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa with mere 466 votes in 2022 assembly elections. The SAD (A) nominated Lovepreet Singh Toofan. So far as the SAD (B) was concerned, the party opted out of the race following a strategic decision by the high command and left the field open for a dramatic shift in local power politics. Out of these, four major political parties, the core battle emerged as a head-to-head collision between the AAP and the INC. Gurdeep Randhawa defeated Jatinder Kaur Randhawa with margin of 5699 votes. Ravikaran Singh Kahlon and Lovepreet Singh Toofan got only 6505 and 2358 votes respectively. Ultimately, Gurdeep Singh Randhawa secured the seat, overcome his 2022 defeat and signalled a major victory for the ruling AAP in a traditionally Congress-leaned bastion. Various factors were attributed to the victory of Gurdeep Singh Randhawa.^{ix}

To boost their campaign efforts, the AAP leadership strategically assigned five villages to each visiting MLA and minister. The campaign saw significant momentum with two visits from Chief

Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann and a high-profile rally led by AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal in Dera Baba Nanak. During his address, Kejriwal pledged the establishment of a new constituent college and an ITI, contingent on the party's victory. Throughout the process, the party remained focused on its track record, consistently highlighted its development agenda from previous years^x. Conversely, the Congress campaign centred on the extensive political legacy of Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa, highlighted his four-term tenure as MLA, his senior rank within the party, and his deep-rooted local connections. MP Randhawa leveraged several high-profile grievances, most notably criticizing the government's mismanagement of paddy procurement. He also raised serious security concerns, alleged that gangster Jaggu Bhagwanpuria was intimidating voters from Kurukshetra prison to benefit the AAP candidate. In this context, the Election Commission relieved DSP Jasbir Singh from his duties following allegations of inaction raised by MP Randhawa^{xi}. Prominent figures such as Partap Singh Bajwa and Barinder Pahra campaigned extensively to bolster support for the Congress candidate, Jatinder Kaur Randhawa. In an effort to consolidate diverse voting blocs, MP Randhawa visited several spiritual centres, including Dhianpur Dham, various Radha Soami Satsang Beas branches, and several Christian Conventions^{xii}. Notably, during his address at a Masih Convention, he sought to build rAAPort with the audience by repeatedly using the liturgical exclamation 'Hallelujah'^{xiii}.

The Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal) remained a decisive factor in the constituency, even after its central leadership withdrew from the by-elections. This local influence was channelled through Halqa in-charge Sucha Singh Langah, who convened a 31-member committee to chart an independent course^{xiv}. On November 17, 2024, the committee formally endorsed the AAP candidate. By framing Congress as the "greater evil" and AAP as the "lesser" one, the SAD(B) local leadership justified a strategic alliance that significantly enhanced Gurdeep Singh Randhawa's electoral prospects^{xv}.

So far as the BJP candidate was concerned, he had previously finished as the second runner-up in the 2022 Dera Baba Nanak (DBN) assembly elections even failed to gain the necessary traction. Ravikaran Kahlon banked on the historical SAD-BJP alliance to sweep the Akali vote bank into his "kitty," even attempted to align himself directly with SAD(B) interests to woo their supporters. However, this manoeuvre proved ineffective. The strategic decision by veteran SAD(B) leader Sucha Singh Langah to back the AAP candidate dealt a significant blow to Kahlon's prospects, effectively eroded his expected base. Ultimately, local dynamics outweighed national influence, as voters showed a clear preference for the state's incumbent party over the BJP-led Union government.

In a nutshell Gurdeep Singh Randhawa's victory can be attributed by a combination of factors: overwhelming support for the ruling AAP, a decisive shift in support from the SAD, and the influential role played by Jaggu Bhagwanpuria.

Chabbewal Assembly Constituency:

Party wise Performance

Candidate	Party	Votes Received	Percentage
Ishank Kumar	AAP	51904	60.78
Ranjit Kumar	INC	23314	27.18
Sohan Singh Thandal	BJP	8692	10.18

Source: Election Commission of India

The Chabbewal Assembly Constituency is a prominent legislative segment in the Hoshiarpur district of Punjab. Reserved for candidates from the Scheduled Castes (SC) category, it plays a vital role in the socio-political landscape of the Doaba region, a belt often referred to as the 'NRIs hub' of Punjab.

Chabbewal is located in the foothills of the Shivalik range. Its geography is characterized by semi-hilly terrain and fertile plains. The constituency is predominantly rural, with an economy heavily reliant on agriculture and remittances from abroad. The area has a high concentration of the Dalit community, which is why the seat is reserved. Education levels are relatively high compared to other rural belts in Punjab, partly due to the influence of the NRI diaspora and local philanthropic initiatives.

The Chabbewal (SC) assembly constituency was established in 2008 following a nationwide delimitation exercise based on 2001 census data. Its creation fundamentally reshaped the local political map. The seat was primarily formed from the dissolution of the Mahilpur (SC) constituency, combined with various rural segments of the Hoshiarpur assembly seat. By absorbing much of Mahilpur's former territory, Chabbewal effectively became its successor. To maintain consistent political advocacy for the region's Dalit population, Chabbewal inherited the Scheduled Caste (SC) reservation status previously held by the Mahilpur segment. In essence, the constituency was designed to consolidate rural and reserved voting blocs into a single, cohesive legislative district.

The political history of Chabbewal witnessed fierce battleground between the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and the Indian National Congress (INC). After delimitation in 2008, the seat was won by Sohan Singh Thandal of the Shiromani Akali Dal in 2012 assembly elections. Thandal, a seasoned politician, served as a minister in the Punjab cabinet and held a firm grip on the local Akali cadre. But the political landscape altered when Dr. Raj Kumar Chabbewal, a local radiologist turned politician, contested on a Congress ticket. He defeated the incumbent Thandal by a massive margin of over 29,000 votes, riding on the anti-incumbency wave against the SAD(B)-BJP alliance. Dr. Raj Kumar became the face of the constituency, known for his accessibility and medical background. He successfully defended his seat in the 2022 Punjab assembly elections, even as the AAP "tsunami" swept most of the state. He defeated the AAP candidate, Harminder Singh Sandhu, by a margin of 7,646 votes, made Chabbewal one of the few seats Congress managed to retain. The year 2024 marked a tectonic shift for the constituency. Dr. Raj Kumar Chabbewal resigned from the Congress and the legislative assembly to join the Aam Aadmi Party. He subsequently contested the 2024 Lok Sabha elections on the AAP ticket and was elected as the Member of Parliament (MP) for Hoshiarpur.^{xvi}

The Chabbewal Assembly byelection set the stage for a high-stakes triangular contest, with each major party strategically selected candidates based on recent political shifts and family legacies. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) fielded Ishank Kumar, son of Dr. Raj Kumar, for this reserved segment. An MBBS graduate from Dayanand Medical College, Ludhiana, Ishank is no stranger to the political landscape. He spearheaded his father's Lok Sabha campaign and was a visible figure during the October 2024 Panchayat polls. His nomination was widely seen as a reward for Dr. Raj Kumar's dominant performance in the Hoshiarpur Lok Sabha seat, where a massive victory margin of 44,100 votes made Ishank the clear choice for the ticket. The Congress party placed its bets on Ranjit Kumar, the President of the District Bar Association. Ranjit's trajectory was recent one. He contested the last Parliamentary election under the BSP banner before switching to Congress just ahead of this byelection. This shift was reportedly orchestrated by former Congress minister Sunder Sham Arora, who played a pivotal role in bringing the legal veteran into the party fold. The BJP nominated Sohan Singh Thandal, a former stalwart who defected from the SAD(B). Thandal's candidacy was particularly interesting due to the absence of the SAD (B), which opted out of the contest following a decision by its high command. This vacuum allowed Thandal to position himself as the primary claimant to the traditional Akali vote bank, hoping to consolidate support from his former political base.

The AAP candidate Ishank Kumar won the seat with huge margin as shown in the above table. This victory cemented AAP's dominance in the region and signalled the fading influence of the Akali Dal

and Congress in their former strongholds. So many reasons were attributed to the victory of Ishank Kumar. Dr Raj Kumar, father of AAP leader Ishank had cultivated a strong personal practice and philanthropic work. By fielding his son, the AAP leveraged this existing trust. This dynastic factor gave dividend to AAP in this constituency. The AAP campaigned heavily on their flagship schemes, including 300 units of free electricity and the opening of Aam Aadmi Clinics. In this rural constituency, these tangible benefits outweighed the ideological rhetoric of the opposition. Moreover, AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal and CM Bhagwant Mann addressed the rallies in the constituency. They promised of shutdown of Toll Plaza, a new ITI and Polytechnic college would be built in the coming days. It gave impetus to campaigning process in favour of Ishank.^{xvii} Moreover, Panchayati Poll's which were held one month ago, in which Ishank's uncle elected Sarpanch and latter along with 200 sarpanches gathered at Raj Kumar's house to greet him. This mammoth support from the rural area further solidified the position of the AAP candidate.^{xviii} The split between the SAD(B) and the BJP significantly benefitted the AAP. Sohan Singh Thandal, a perennial contender in this seat for the Akalis, contested on the BJP ticket. On the Congress side, the party was faction ridden. It is mentioned here that Congress Halqa Incharge Kulwinder Singh Rasoolpuri was major claimant of Congress ticket from Chabbewal. But Congress gave ticket to BSP turncoat leader Ranjit Kumar. As a resentment, Kulwinder Singh Rasoolpuri joined the AAP. Therefore, Congress faced crisis of factionalism which resulted into the defeat of Congress candidate in Chabbewal.^{xix}

Issues in Chabbewal Constituency: The prominent issues were the agricultural distress, depletion of water table and the rising cost of farming inputs in the Chabbewal constituency. The infrastructure development in Kandi Area as parts of the constituency fall under the 'Kandi' (semi-hilly) belt, which historically suffers from poor irrigation facilities and road connectivity compared to the plains was also raised and discussed. This region is also affected with massive out-bound migration especially to the Western shores. The political parties thus discussed it with the local people during campaigning period and, promised to provide employment opportunities for youth, including to revive local industries. At the same time, people raised for better health facilities, and Dr. Raj Kumar who already served them reiterated for widening medical access to the common people. People also raised to invest in government institutions especially government civil hospitals. On the other hand, Chabbewal is often seen as a barometer for the Dalit vote bank in Punjab. Because it is part of the Hoshiarpur Lok Sabha constituency, winning Chabbewal is crucial for any party aiming for parliamentary success in the region. The recent shift to AAP suggests that the electorate is increasingly prioritizing "developmental politics" and the 'Delhi-Punjab Model' over traditional identity-based or party-loyalist voting patterns.^{xx}

ASSEMBLY CONSTITUENCY: GIDDERBAHA

Party wise Performance:

Candidate	Party	Votes Received	Percentage
AAP	Hardeep Singh Dimpy Dhillon	71644	52.16
INC	Amrita Warring	46675	36.17
BJP	Manpreet Singh Badal	12227	8.9
SAD (A)	Sukhrajkaran Singh Niamiwala	715	0.52

Source: Election Commission of India

The Gidderbaha Assembly Constituency is often denoted as the 'Nursery of Punjab Politics.' Located in the Sri Muktsar Sahib district within the Malwa heartland, it is arguably one of the most high-profile seats in the state, having served as the political launchpad for some of Punjab's most powerful dynasties. Gidderbaha is situated in the south-western zone of Punjab, bordered by Bathinda, Faridkot, and Ferozepur. The constituency has a significant agrarian population with a high percentage of Scheduled Castes (AAProx. 42% in the district). While Sikhism is the majority religion in the rural belt, the urban pockets of Gidderbaha town have a substantial Hindu population.

Gidderbaha's fame is inextricably linked to the Badal family. Parkash Singh Badal, five-time Chief Minister represented this seat for five consecutive terms starting from 1969 to 1985. He essentially built his political empire from this soil. Manpreet Singh Badal, nephew of Parkash Singh Badal also made his debut here, won the seat four times (1995, 1997, 2002, and 2007) on a SAD(B) ticket before forming his own party and later joined the Congress. The monopoly of the Badal family was broken in 2012 by a young firebrand leader, Amrinder Singh Raja Warring. Warring defeated Manpreet Singh Badal (who was then leading the People's Party of Punjab) in a historic upset. Warring successfully defended the 'Fort' in 2017 and 2022, solidified his position as the face of the Congress in Malwa and eventually ascended to the post of Punjab Congress President. The Gidderbaha by-election on November 20, 2024, marked a historic departure from the traditional Akali-Congress binary.

In this byelection, AAP fielded Hardeep Singh alias Dimpy Dhillon. Actually, Dimpy Dhillon was active working member of the Shiromani Akali Dal and close aide of party chief Sukhbir Singh Badal. Dimpy's association with Badal family dates back to 1990's when latter faced a tough time in transport business. In these circumstances, Dimpy's family provided several buses to the Badal's which cemented their relationship in future. Later on, Dimpy Dhillon unsuccessfully contested two assembly elections on the SAD ticket against INC candidate Amrinder Singh Raja Warring in 2017 and 2022. However, this bond of over three and half decades ended on 25 Aug 2024 when Dimpy Dhillon left the SAD(B) on the pretext that Sukhbir Singh Badal and Manpreet Badal had hobnobbed with each other for the Gidderbaha byelection. On 28 April 2024, Dimpy switched his loyalty toward the AAP. The Congress Party fielded Amrita Warring, wife of Punjab Congress President Amrinder Singh (Raja Warring). She was running to retain the seat her husband held for three consecutive terms in 2012, 2017, and 2022.

The BJP nominated Manpreet Singh Badal, the nephew of five-time Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal. The selection of Manpreet Singh Badal brought his political career full circle. He first entered the Punjab Assembly via a 1995 by-election in this very constituency. At the time, the seat had fallen vacant following the conviction of the incumbent Congress MLA, Raghbir Singh. Competing on a Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) ticket, Manpreet's victory was a landmark moment, as he became the party's sole representative in the assembly during that period. Followed by his initial 1995 victory, Manpreet Singh Badal successfully defended the Gidderbaha seat in the 1997, 2002, and 2007 elections as a candidate for the Shiromani Akali Dal (B). The trajectory of his career took a dramatic turn in 2012 when he got separated from the SAD(B) and formed his own outfit, the People's Party of Punjab (PPP). However, this venture proved difficult at the polls, and he lost his seat in the 2012 assembly elections. In search of political reset, Manpreet later joined the Congress Party and shifted his focus to Bathinda. In 2014 Parliamentary elections, he contested from Bathinda but was defeated by Harsimrat Kaur Badal. He successfully returned to the legislative assembly by winning the Bathinda urban seat on the Congress ticket in 2017 assembly elections and served as a senior minister in the Congress government. The most recent shift in his political journey occurred in January 2023, when he defected from Congress to join the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), ultimately to establish the stage for his return to his original political home in Gidderbaha.^{xxi}

So far as the Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal) is concerned, the party's high command opted to sit out the aforementioned by-elections entirely, decided not to field any candidate for the contest and created the significant political vacuum. In this situation, Simranjit Singh Mann-led Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar) strategically positioned itself to capture the Panthic vote. To fill this void, the SAD(A) nominated Sukhraj Singh Niamiwala (Sukh Rajkaran Singh). His candidacy carried deep symbolic weight, as he is the son of Krishan Bhagwan Singh, one of the two Sikh protesters killed in the 2015 Behbal Kalan firing incident. By fielding Niamiwala, the party sought to focus its campaign on the unresolved pursuit of justice for the sacrilege cases and subsequent police actions that continue to resonate with the Punjab electorate.^{xxii} The election was primarily a two-way fight between AAP and INC, despite four parties were in the competition. The AAP candidate clinched the seat from heavyweight Amrita Warring with a 24,969-vote lead. The results were disAAPointing for the BJP, who garnered only 12,227 votes, and even worse for SAD(A), who lost their deposit. Several factors contributed to the AAP's victory and the subsequent defeat of the opposing parties.

During the campaign, Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann spearheaded the effort for Hardeep Singh Dimpy Dhillon by addressing multiple rallies. The CM's strategic slogan, "AAP di Sarkar, AAP da MLA" (AAP's government, AAP's MLA), resonated with voters, while widespread hoardings highlighted the administration's achievements—most notably the Malwa Canal project, which left a significant impression on the constituency. Furthermore, Dimpy Dhillon's own track record played a crucial role. As the former SAD (B) Halqa in-Charge, he was credited with essential local infrastructure improvements, including the construction of water channels, pipeline installation, and upgrades to the city's sewerage system. Finally, with SAD (B) absent from the ballot, Akali voters shifted their enthusiastic support to the AAP candidate. Dimpy Dhillon was not seen as an "outsider" despite changing party. In 2022 assembly elections, Dhillon as SAD candidate had lost to Raja Warring by a narrow margin of only 1349 votes. So, there was sympathy factor among voters who felt he deserved a chance to represent them. Moreover, as the candidate of the ruling party in Punjab, Dhillon benefitted, from the state government's resources. The AAP leadership framed the by-election as a referendum on their performance, successfully convinced voters that electing a ruling party MLA would ensure better funding and growth for the local area. Together, these factors paved the way for Dhillon's decisive victory.^{xxiii}

On the opposing side, INC candidate Amrita Warring faced significant headwinds, primarily driven by accusations of *Parivarvaad* (dynastic politics) from both the AAP and the BJP. This narrative gained traction following her husband Raja Warring's move to Ludhiana after his Lok Sabha victory in May 2024. Many voters perceived her candidacy as a deliberate attempt by a single family to maintain a monopoly on the seat. The campaign was further complicated by several critical factors. Allegations regarding a transport scam involving Raja Warring cast a shadow over the campaign and damaged the family's reputation. Raja Warring's shift to a different constituency fuelled the argument that the family was more interested in political manoeuvring than local representation. While the Warring family attempted to counter these attacks by highlighting their deep-rooted, long-term connection to the region, the strategy struggled to outweigh the negative optics of nepotism.^{xxiv} Additionally, Gidderbaha Returning Officer Jaspal Singh issued a notice to Amrinder Singh (Raja Warring) for allegedly violating the Model Code of Conduct. Raja Warring faced accusations of campaigning at a local mosque to solicit votes for his wife, the Congress candidate Amrita Warring, by AAPealing to religious sentiments. Furthermore, he was accused of attempting to bribe voters.^{xxv} Ultimately, these combined pressures made it difficult for Amrita Warring to move beyond her husband's shadow and establish an independent mandate.

Manpreet Badal centred his campaign on a legacy of tangible development and the strategic advantage of his ties to the central government. Drawing on his experience as Finance Minister, he highlighted

several transformative initiatives. He publicised his role in shifting local farming dynamics by providing 18,000 tubewell connections and facilitated a transition from cotton to rice cultivation. Badal took credit for installing Reverse Osmosis (RO) water treatment plants across all villages, a move he claimed was instrumental in reducing the prevalence of waterborne diseases and cancer in the region.^{xxvi} Running as a BJP candidate, he positioned himself as a direct bridge to the Union Finance Ministry. He argued that his personal connection to Gidderbaha, combined with his influence at the Central government, would allow him to secure major federal projects and achieve 'Smart City' status for the constituency. Despite all these promises, Manpreet Badal could not perform well. His campaign was hampered by several key obstacles, most notably the 'turncoat' label that damaged his public image. His transition from the SAD (B) to his own People's Party of Punjab (PPP), then to Congress, and ultimately to the BJP, Manpreet Badal faced intense enquiry over his political consistency. Opponents frequently leveraged these shifts to cast doubt on his reliability and long-term allegiances. Further, the BJP's efforts in rural Punjab were restrained by the political impacts of the farmers' movement. While Manpreet maintained significant local influence, his personal popularity could not overcome the party's branding challenges within the agrarian electorate. His campaign further stumbled when he faced allegations of violating the Model Code of Conduct. The controversy stemmed from his promise to secure youth employment in federal agencies such as the BSF, CRPF, ITBP and the Railways.^{xxvii} Ultimately, resentment of rural electorate with the party, branding obstacles and the controversy surrounding his campaign promises culminated in the defeat of the BJP veteran Manpreet Badal.

Despite a poor electoral performance, SAD (A) carved out a distinct niche by positioning itself as the leading defender of 'Panthic' interests, particularly in the vacuum left by the Sukhbir Badal-led SAD's withdrawal. The party's strategy focused on several key pillars. The campaign leaned heavily on the demand for accountability regarding the 2015 sacrilege cases and the subsequent police firing. The party highlighted the long-standing state grievances, including Punjab's riparian water rights and the release of *Bandi Singhs* (Sikh prisoners). Further, the party framed the AAP's administration as 'Delhi-centric', argued that local governance had been compromised by outside interests. Consequently, the primary function of SAD (A) was to act as an ideological anchor, ensuring that the 2015 sacrilege and matters of Sikh identity remained central to the political narrative in the Malwa region.

In a nutshell, Gidderbaha is considered a weathercock constituency for Punjab's Malwa region. The constituency is known for high voter turnouts (often exceeding 80%), reflecting a politically conscious and active electorate. It is a battleground where traditional family legacies (Badals & Warrings) are increasingly being tested against the demand for 'Badlav' (change). Beyond politics, it is the home of legendary Punjabi cultural icons like Gurdas Maan and the famous lyricist Jaani, adding a layer of cultural prestige to the region. Today, Gidderbaha represents the 'New Punjab' political landscape—where old loyalties are shifting, and the ruling AAP has successfully breached what was once considered an impenetrable fortress of traditional parties.

Assembly Constituency: Barnala

Party wise Performance

Party	Candidate's Name	Votes Received	Percentage
INC	Kuldeep Singh Dhillon	28254	28.24
AAP	Harinder Singh Dhaliwal	26097	26.09
BJP	Kewal Singh Dhillon	17958	17.95

Independent	Gurdeep Singh Bathh	16899	16.89
SAD(A)	Govind Singh Sandhu	7900	7.90

Source: Election Commission of India

The Barnala Assembly Constituency (General) is situated in the heart of Punjab's Malwa region, serves as a critical electoral component of the Sangrur Parliamentary Constituency. While the district was originally part of Sangrur, it was officially established as a separate entity in November 2006. Despite its political significance, Barnala holds the distinction of being the least populous district in the state. As per census 2011, majority population belongs to Sikh religion (78.54%), followed by Hindu (18.95) and Muslim (2.20%). The literacy rate stands at 68.9%, trailing slightly behind the overall Punjab state average. Barnala has been the home or birthplace of several luminaries who have left an indelible mark on Indian politics, literature, and military history. The notable people Surjit Singh Barnala (politician who served as the chief minister of Punjab state), Ram Sarup Singh Ankhil (Punjabi writer, novelist and poet), Balwant Gargi (Punjabi language dramatist), Devendra Satyarthi (Indian folklorist), Karam Singh (soldier who was the first living recipient of the Param Vir Chakra), Sant Ram Udasi (Punjabi poet) etc.

Historically, the Barnala Assembly Constituency has served as a primary ideological battleground for Punjab's two traditional political parties i.e the Shiromani Akali Dal (B) and the Indian National Congress. Between 1952 and 1992, the seat was largely a stronghold for the Akali Dal. This era was specifically defined by the political dominance of the Barnala family, who represented the constituency for the majority of the time. However, the post-1992 era saw this monopoly dissolve; since then, political power shifted among the INC, the SAD(B) and independent contender, reflected a more fragmented and competitive electoral landscape. These developments marked a departure from Barnala family dominance toward a more fragmented, multi-party trend in Barnala's electoral history. The rise of the Aam Aadmi Party fundamentally altered Punjab's political landscape. Under the leadership of Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann, Sangrur parliamentary constituency established itself as a reliable AAP bastion. This influence was evident in the Barnala assembly segment also, which the party successfully held in both 2017 and 2022. However, this dominance faced a setback in the November 2024 by-election, where the incumbent party failed to retain its seat.

This by-election primarily featured five candidates from different parties. The Congress Party tendered a ticket to debutant Kuldeep Singh Dhillon, who was serving as the party's district president at the time. Dhillon is the brother of the late Harinder Singh "Seera" Dhillon, a prominent and long-time leader within the Punjab Youth Congress. The AAP fielded Harinder Singh Dhaliwal to succeed Gurmeet Singh (Meet Hayer), who was recently elected to the Lok Sabha. Dhaliwal, a close associate of Hayer, previously served as his covering candidate for the Sangrur Parliamentary Constituency during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Although Dhaliwal worked in Hayer's Barnala team since joining the AAP in 2013, he had never officially held a post within the party organization despite his decade-long service. The BJP fielded its state Vice President, Kewal Singh Dhillon, who had defected from the Congress party in June 2022. Dhillon previously represented the Barnala assembly constituency as a Congress MLA in 2007 and 2012. He also contested the Sangrur Lok Sabha seat twice under the Congress banner lost to AAP's Bhagwant Singh Mann in 2019, and later to Simranjit Singh Mann of the SAD(A) in the subsequent by-election. Notably, he was recognized as the driving force behind the creation of Barnala as an independent district in 2006 during Captain Amarinder Singh's tenure as Chief Minister.^{xxviii} The veteran Panthic leader Simranjit Singh Mann, fielded his politically well-connected grandson, Govind Singh Sandhu, as its official candidate. Because the mainstream Shiromani Akali Dal (B) had chosen to boycott the by-elections, political analysts were closely watching the SAD (M)'s performance as a crucial indicator of shifting voter sentiment.

Gurdeep Singh Batth's independent candidacy proved to be the most critical factor in shaping the constituency's election outcome. As AAP's District President and District Planning Board Chairman, Batth was an influential grassroots leader. He expected to receive the AAP ticket after sitting MLA Meet Hayer won a Lok Sabha seat, but the party instead nominated Hayer's close aide, Harinder Singh Dhaliwal. Batth demanded that the high command replace Dhaliwal, but the leadership refused to shift. Despite efforts by the AAP's Punjab in-charge Sandeep Pathak to placate him with a state-level designation, Batth resigned from the party and entered the electoral fray as an independent candidate.^{xxix}

The election result in the Barnala AC was setback for the incumbent AAP. In contrast to its success in three other assembly constituencies where it remained victorious, the party faced defeat in Barnala as it lost the seat to the Congress candidate. The Congress nominee, Kuldeep Singh Dhillon alias Kala Dhillon secured the victory with a 2157 vote margin against Harinder Dhaliwal of the AAP as shown in the above table. So many factors were attributed for the victory of the Congress candidate, the defeat of the incumbent AAP and the other parties.

During the election campaign, former Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi and former Education Minister Vijay Inder Singla led an aggressive drive for Congress candidate Kuldeep Singh Dhillon. Channi attacked the ruling AAP, accusing them of looting the state and famously labelling them 'Black Britishers'.^{xxx} This strong anti-incumbency sentiment ultimately favoured the Congress candidate. Since the AAP government had already been in power for more than two years, the by-election effectively became a local referendum on its performance regarding farming issues. In the rural areas of Barnala, resentment ran high due to a shortage of DAP fertilizer which was essential for the wheat sowing season and delays in paddy procurement and lifting the crops from 'mandis'.^{xxxi} Furthermore, Congress hit the AAP government over its failure to effectively eradicate the state's drug problem.

On the AAP side, despite enthusiastic campaign efforts from Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer and Hardeep Singh Mundian in support of the AAP candidate Harinder Singh Dhaliwal, the party ultimately fell victim to internal rebellion. The most decisive factor in the election was the defection of Gurdeep Singh Batth, a former AAP leader who contested as an independent after being denied the party ticket. Batth secured 16,899 vote which was a substantial share that directly eroded AAP's traditional rural voter base. This split in the vote between the official AAP nominee and the rebel candidate allowed the Congress to secure victory by a narrow margin of 2157 votes. Consequently, AAP's internal friction directly benefited the Congress party.^{xxxii xxxiii}

So far as the BJP was concerned, its inability to secure the rural electorate can be attributed to widespread dissatisfaction with its agricultural policy agenda. However, the BJP candidate Kewal Singh Dhillon secured 17,958 votes, drew strength primarily from Barnala's urban wards that historically might have supported the ruling party. The electoral outcome for SAD (A) in the constituency remained weak, despite the lack of competition from SAD (B). Candidate Govind Singh Sandhu focused heavily on the Panthic grievances and state autonomy, emphasizing the release of *Bandi Singhs*, anti-drug measures and opposition to central agricultural policies. This emotional AAPeal, however, failed to secure a majority, indicating that party patron Simranjit Singh Mann could not replicate the momentum of his 2022 by-election success. Another defining characteristic of the Barnala by-election was the sharp decline in voter turnout, which dropped from 71.8% in 2022 to approximately 56.3% in 2024. Historical trends indicate that low voter turnout disproportionately disadvantages the incumbent government. With the erosion of the ruling party's initial popular mandate, the disciplined turnout of the opposition's core electorate is shifting the political balance against the incumbent.

CONCLUSION:

For the ruling the AAP government, winning three of the four assembly seats was an important mid-term endorsement from the voters. As the Mann-led government reached the middle of its term, it was facing criticism over several issues, including worsening law and order, the persistent drug problem, growing gangster activity, distress among farmers, and the migration of industries out of Punjab. By capturing three seats previously held by the Congress, AAP successfully demonstrated that its core welfare initiatives—most notably free domestic electricity and the Aam Aadmi Clinics still held tremendous sway over rural voters. The victory also underscored the ruling party's ability to effectively leverage state machinery and strategic political defections to pull off challenging campaigns. Conversely, internal division proved to be the ultimate undoing for AAP's official candidate in the lone seat it lost. The election vividly illustrated the destructive impact of a third-party challenger. The AAP rebel candidate, though unable to secure a victory, successfully played the role of spoilsport by fracturing the party's core vote bank. This outcome strongly suggests that in the absence of such intense intra-party factionalism and dissension, the AAP could have realistically achieved a clean sweep.

For the Congress, the loss of Gidderbaha and Dera Baba Nanak was an embarrassing reality check. The results clearly demonstrated the limitations of dynastic politics, as voters outrightly rejected the strategy of fielding the wives of sitting MPs. This outcome sparked significant internal friction within the state unit, exposing a deep rift between central leaders like Raja Warring and the grassroots cadre who felt sidelined by high-profile family nominations. On the Other hand, the total withdrawal of the Shiromani Akali Dal significantly altered the dynamics of the election. Following the Akal Takht's declaration of party chief Sukhbir Singh Badal as *Tankhaiya* (guilty of religious misconduct), the party opted out of the race entirely. Historically, the SAD(B) commanded a highly disciplined, conservative Panthic vote bank. In their absence, these traditional rural voters fractured. A substantial portion migrated to AAP as a pragmatic choice for immediate local development, while another segment shifted toward the Congress or independent Panthic alternatives, completely reshaping traditional multi-cornered calculations. It was evident from the results that the decision of opt out the by-elections gave robust dividend to the incumbent AAP.

Though the BJP failed to open its account in terms of seats, its performance indicated a slow, steady realignment. Contesting independently across Punjab since breaking ties with SAD(B) over the 2020 farm laws, the party continued to build an independent support base. By drawing urban Hindu voters and sections of the Dalit electorate away from Congress, the BJP solidified its position as a persistent challenger in Punjab's evolving multi-party dynamic. The November 2024 by-elections in Punjab concluded with a clear structural message that voter loyalty is increasingly conditional and transactional. The AAP successfully proved its ability to aggressively expand and dismantle legacy fortresses, yet its defeat in Barnala showed it remains vulnerable to internal complacency and grassroots pushback. For the opposition, the results served as a stern warning against relying purely on dynastic politics, while highlighting a changing state fabric where traditional alliances are crumbling, paving the way for highly localized, unpredictable mandates ahead.

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