

Punjab needs a political renewal to turn the tide



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THE Punjab Assembly elections, scheduled to be held early next year, will be a watershed moment in the state's turbulent political history. The polls are set to redefine the rules of engagement. For the first time since Independence, five principal political parties are set to contend for power.

Among the four Opposition parties challenging the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is Waris Punjab De, a fledgling formation that has acquired considerable traction among the rural Sikh youth through its reformist zeal and promise of political change. This also suggests a waning popular interest in traditional parties.

Drawing much of its appeal from a romantic conception of politics, the new entrant in the fray is likely to trench upon the vote share of other political parties, especially the Shiromani Akali Dal, although it may fall short of posing a serious challenge to the ruling party. Its visible presence in the electoral arena has, nevertheless, disturbed Punjab's political equilibrium and revived apprehensions about the return of radical politics.

The declining fortunes of the Akali Dal, now seeking to regain its political relevance, growing appeal of the muscular BJP and the self-inflicted wounds of the Congress have together altered Punjab's politics. And the possibility of an Akali-BJP alliance could transform the pre-poll and post-poll electoral arithmetic, with the alliance potentially emerging as the principal challenger to the AAP.

In these circumstances, the possibility of a fractured mandate and political instability, with implications for the state's development imperatives cannot be dis-

counted. Punjab's well-documented decline across several development indices over the years cannot be reversed without a broad political consensus on vital policies required for its renewal.

The prevailing circumstances on the ground and the requirements of a resilient democracy, demand a return to civility in political discourse and a measure of grace in interpersonal relationships. Cordial lines of communication among political leaders are indispensable to collegiality among leaders necessary to forge a broad consensus on prudent policies for the state's development.

Sickening public conversations among political leaders which have become an unending spectacle on social media, have eroded their personal credibility as role models for citizens and diminished the standing of political parties as custodians of representative democracy.

Reputations casually maligned and the dignity of individuals routinely compromised infract the first principles of democratic

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engagement. Words, once spoken do not simply disappear with time. The hurt caused by harsh words leaves an open wound in the soul that refuses to heal easily.

Speech delivered in a violent or intimidating tone deprives democracy of its benign softness and persuasive appeal, its central virtues in the ordering of political and social life. It is time, therefore, to insist on raising the level of public discourse, moving it decisively away from rancour, calumny and personal animosity.

The resurgence of Punjab as a pulsating and thriving state demands magnanimous leadership capable of rising above the debilitating pettiness that has afflicted its polity for far too long. The compelling need today is to find leaders who can rise above themselves,

embrace compassion and empathy for the marginalised as the leitmotif of governance and resist the seduction of power for its own sake. We must search for leaders who do not mistake oppressive authority for people's power and shun those whose claim to leadership rests on a brazen display of muscle and the servility of power brokers masquerading as supporters.

The indictment of arrogant power indifferent to the injustice and suffering of the masses is an undeniable moral obligation. Also, democracy is eventually sustained by leaders who can see the unshed tears and hear the suppressed sighs of the oppressed and the vulnerable. The valiant people of Punjab who draw inspiration from the teachings of the Gurus have a legitimate right to governance rooted in law and justice. Clearly, those who live under the law must themselves be bound by it and should be seen to be so.

The true test of a vibrant democracy is the purity of its processes that can yield inspirational leadership through a free contestation of ideas: leadership rooted not in the

"conceit of the clever", but in an understanding of the wholeness of the human condition. Democracy is about public reasoning around the moral questions of our times.

As Punjab struggles to reclaim its lost glory, it needs a government led by leaders imbued with "audacious idealism": leaders capable of charting a course that restores hope to the people and gives tangible expression to that hope through employment generation, purposeful policies to confront the pervasive drug addiction and gangsterism, effective checks against the gross abuse of State power and corruption in high places, a considered response to the vexed questions surrounding the restructuring of the state's agricultural economy, environment protection and the preservation of social harmony founded upon the bonding values of a *Saanjhi Virsaat*.

Despite challenges, can we hope that political parties will rise above casteist and communal politics in the state elections? Can they project leaders with the requisite

moral credentials to speak honestly to a proud and heroic people and offer them a life of dignity or is Punjab doomed to suffer those for whom politics is the pursuit of power unfettered by a sense of right or wrong. These are questions that Punjab's political parties and leaders must confront.

Democracy is validated when an informed electorate is able to entrust leadership to those powered by selflessness and committed to pursuing politics within an ennobling framework that prizes human dignity and the esteem of the people above all.

Hopefully, Punjab can become an interlocutor for an energising politics: politics that will awaken the will of the people, drawing inspiration from the idealism of our founders and translate that will into a renewed public purpose. This would need a coalition of the best across political parties and the establishment of conditions necessary for the flowering of transformational leadership. The 2027 elections will indeed test the collective wisdom of the state's electorate.

Views are personal