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INDIA'S AKALI-BJP ALLIANCE

The 1997 Legislative Assembly Elections

Gurharpal Singh

In India's 11th Lok Sabha elections (May 1996), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerged as the largest single political party. As speculation intensified about the possibility of the BJP forming its first ever national government, one regional party, the Akali Dal (Badal) (AD[B]), made a public declaration of support for the BJP's claim, which surprised many observers. Why, they wondered, was the Sikhs' premier political representative prepared to give support to the leading Hindu nationalist party? Was there not something fundamentally irreconcilable in the AD(B)-supported Sikh agitation in favor of regional political and cultural autonomy as proposed in the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (ASR) and the BJP's national agenda for a common national culture as espoused in *Hindutva* ideology? How could two such parties become political bedfellows?

This paper analyzes the emergence of the Akali-BJP alliance within the context of regional and national political developments since the early 1990s, examining the tactical, strategic, and ideological factors that have enabled the two parties to coalesce and thereby unlock the "Punjab problem" while simultaneously projecting an alternative agenda for national Indian politics. Particular emphasis is given to post-1992 regional and national developments and the significance of the February 1997 Punjab Legislative Assembly (PLA) elections that resulted in a landslide victory for the AD(B)-BJP alliance.

Although the recent minority national governments have rekindled interest in coalition politics in India, combinations of ideologically opposed parties have been common at the provincial level. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Communist parties (CPI and CPI[M]) developed the concept of "United Fronts,"

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“Democratic Fronts,” and “Left Fronts.” One of the leading practitioners of such fronts, Harkrishan Singh Surjeet, has coordinated the United Front combine of 16 parties that has been led successively by Deve Gowda (May 1996 to April 1997) and I. K. Gujral (after April 1997) as prime ministers.¹ Surjeet initially perfected his art in Punjab after the 1967 PLA elections, when a combination of the Akali Dal, Jana Sangh (the BJP’s forerunner), and the Communist parties defeated the Congress.² Applying formula Marxism, Surjeet rationalized these fronts in terms of developing a “Democratic Front.” In reality, however, the fronts (especially between 1967 and 1971) were ineffective in challenging Congress hegemony in the state, which was sustained by the frequent use of President’s Rule under Indira Gandhi. The Akali-BJP alliance of the 1990s appears to pose a serious challenge to this hegemony. In conditions where Congress dominance has collapsed, the Akalis are seeking to establish themselves as a pre-eminent regional political party, while the BJP views this arrangement as the first of many regional pacts that would lead it to national power.³

This development needs to be understood against the background of how these two parties ideologically construct the other. For the BJP and its sister organizations, Sikhism is essentially a militant, “martial face” of Hinduism. At the height of the troubles in 1984, a BJP resolution declared, “The Sikh Panth was born to protect Hinduism, and the venerable Gurus sacrificed themselves and their dear children to protect Hindu honor. The Sikh contribution to the strength and prosperity of India is magnificent, and the nation is truly grateful.”⁴

These words were backed by deeds insofar as the BJP and its associated organizations offered a sympathetic ear to Akali politicians when the ruling Congress (I) was condoning the pogroms against Sikhs in Delhi. At the same time, because the BJP does not acknowledge *religious* separatism among the Sikhs, it is vehemently opposed to claims for *political* separatism. The BJP followed a hard line against the armed struggle for Khalistan throughout the 1980s; like the Congress (I), it sees the ASR as a potentially secessionist document.

The AD(B), on the other hand, as the leading practitioner of machine politics within Sikhdom, considers that the ideological baggage of the BJP has been elided in the language of the “older brother” and the party’s anti-Con-

1. For the role of Surjeet as a backseat driver of the United Front, see *India Today* (New Delhi), December 31, 1996.

2. T. R. Sharma, “Diffusion and Accommodation: The Contending Strategies of the Congress Party and the Akali Dal in Punjab,” *Pacific Affairs* 59:4, pp. 634–54.

3. *Sunday Tribune* (Chandigarh), February 23, 1997.

4. Quoted in C. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics 1925 to the 1990s* (London: Hurst and Company, 1996), p. 345.

gress (I) credentials. Because ideological pragmatism has been an AD(B) hallmark, the sternest critics of such an alliance have come from among Sikh radicals and militants, especially the Akali Dal faction led by Simmeranjit Singh Mann (AD[M]). The AD(M) has consistently sought to project the Sikh question as an issue of minorities alongside the struggle of lower castes and India's Muslims. Hence, although the potential for assimilating Sikhs within Hinduism as the price for the AD(B)'s alliance with the BJP seems to be the greatest threat to a distinct Sikh identity since the late 19th century, political realists within the AD(B) apparently have calculated that this alliance provides the maximum scope for preserving Sikh identity and, indeed, advancing the agenda for political autonomy.⁵

Punjab and Political Developments Since 1992

The BJP's rise to national prominence in the 1990s has been accompanied by its spectacular growth in the northern regions, where it has ruled state governments in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and, in alliance with the Shiv Sena, Maharashtra. While many factors have contributed to this rise,⁶ the BJP's stance on internal insurgencies in Kashmir, Punjab, and the northeastern states has struck a chord with the anxieties of India's Hindu population. Yet, in contrast to Kashmir, the party's position on Sikh militancy and the Punjab question marked a distinct shift after the 1992 PLA elections. Most leading Akali factions boycotted these elections, resulting in a landslide victory for the Congress (I) in one of the lowest voter turnouts in Punjab since 1947.⁷ Under the fig leaf of such legitimacy, the Congress (I) administration of Beant Singh intensified the strategy of violent control against both Sikh militant and moderate political leadership.⁸ Politically harassed within Punjab, the moderates became active in Sikh politics outside the state. In the December 1993 elections to the Delhi Assembly, moderate Akalis encouraged Sikh voters in the capital to vote for the BJP. Delhi was one of the few successes for the BJP after the 1992 demolition of the Ayodhya mosque and the presidential dismissal of its governments in four states. The new BJP government in the capital reciprocated

5. Since pre-independence, Akali Dal tactical alliances with political parties have largely been determined by possibilities they offer for advancing and protecting the interests of the Sikh community. For a classic study, see Baldev Raj Nayer, *Minority Politics in the Punjab* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966). The AD(B)'s embrace of the BJP appears to be true to form.

6. Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist Movement*, ch. 11.

7. Gurharpal Singh, "Punjab Elections 1992: Breakthrough or Breakdown?" *Asian Survey* 32:11 (November 1992), pp. 988-99.

8. Gurharpal Singh, "Punjab Since 1984: Disorder, Order and Legitimacy," *ibid.*, 34:4 (April 1996), pp. 410-21.

cated this support by declaring Punjabi as a second language and launching cases against anti-Sikh rioters (mainly Congress supporters) of 1984.⁹ The rapprochement between the two parties, however, took time to consolidate: the proposal for an alliance against Congress (I) strengthened only after the 1996 Lok Sabha elections in which the two parties forged an “understanding” that led to AD(B) victory in 8 of the 13 seats from Punjab.¹⁰

The fortunes of the Congress (I) have been in sharp decline since the late 1980s; only the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 prevented the party’s defeat in the 10th Lok Sabha elections in June that year. For the new minority national government headed by Narasimha Rao, a victory in PLA elections was accompanied by Congress (I) success for 12 Punjab Lok Sabha seats. These additional MPs provided a critical boost to the party at a time when it was desperately seeking to establish an overall majority in Parliament. The triumph in Punjab was used to intensify counterinsurgency operations against Sikh militants. The new administration gave a free rein to the security services to crush armed resistance, even though this resulted in high casualties among nonmilitant civilians.¹¹ By early 1993, most of the leading militant organizations had been smashed, but the Congress (I) was unable to transform this achievement into an enduring legitimacy.¹² With a crippling fiscal debt and the reluctance of the national government to deliver the outstanding provisions of the Rajiv-Longowal Accord, the administration was compelled to engage in ideological warfare against Sikh militancy by proscribing the activities of Sikh moderates. The standard bearers of this policy were Chief Minister Beant Singh and K. P. S. Gill, the chief of police. The assassination of Beant Singh in August 1995 by a suicide bomber, however, deprived the Congress (I) of his firm leadership and implicated Gill in the security lapses, which resulted in his subsequent removal from Punjab. Harcharn Singh Brar, Beant Singh’s successor, was reluctant to wage an ideological war against Sikhdom. He preferred instead to reopen issues within the 1985 Rajiv-Longowal Accord, in particular the vexing question of sharing water with neighboring states, over which he maintained remarkable consistency since 1992. Even Brar’s moderate leadership failed to lift the Congress (I) as the party became increasingly associated with decay, corruption, and systematic abuse of human rights. When the party suffered a humiliating defeat in the 1996 Lok Sabha elections in Punjab, retaining only two of the 12 seats it had won in 1991, the new leader in New Delhi, national Congress (I) leader Sitaram Kesri ousted Brar and replaced him with a loyalist,

9. *Des Pardes* (Punjabi, Southall), December 17, 1993.

10. *India Today (IT)*, May 31, 1997.

11. *Jane’s Defence Weekly* (London), June 23, 1993.

12. Singh, “Punjab Since 1984,” pp. 418–21.

Rajinder Kaur Bhattal.¹³ But Bhattal's plan to revive the fortunes of the Congress (I) with a populist 51-point program on the eve of the elections backfired as the Election Commission, suspecting a pre-election spending spree, advanced the date of the polls.¹⁴

Within Sikh politics, violent counterinsurgency eliminated the militants, marginalized the radicals, and ultimately succeeded in strengthening the moderates. As counterinsurgency operations smashed the armed and democratic militants after 1992,¹⁵ their political residue sought refuge with the radicals. Between 1992 and 1994—as in the years between 1985 and 1987¹⁶—the factional struggle for dominance was largely conducted within the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), the “Sikh political system.” Confronted with the Beant administration's onslaught, the radicals and the SGPC under Gurcharan Singh Tohra sought to forge a united Sikh political front by employing the ideological, institutional, and factional resources of Sikhdom.¹⁷ In this endeavor they inducted the services of the *jathedar* (head priest) of *Akal Takht* (the source of temporal authority among Sikhs). Under his sponsorship, six moderate and radical Akali factions merged in May 1994 to form the Akali Dal (Amritsar) (AD[A]). This merger was followed by the Amritsar Declaration, which called for the formation of “an independent Sikh homeland wherein the community would be free to profess and propagate Sikhism without interference from any quarter.”¹⁸ The main moderate group, notably the AD(B), stood aloof from the SGPC's and the *jathedar*'s efforts to ensnare it in a unity dialogue. Subsequently, the AD(B) demonstrated the strength of its political machine in the successful PLA by-election of May 1994. Emerging as the leading political representative of the Sikh community, the AD(B) acquired significant factional defections from the AD(A) and, perhaps more importantly, moderated the antics of Tohra, who had engineered the unity moves. Tohra and AD(B) leader Prakash Singh Badal reached a compromise in February 1995: the former agreed to restrict his activities to religion and the latter would lead the political program. Tohra's ambitions were further clipped by the AD(B)'s victory in the SGPC elections in 1996. Overall, these developments further enhanced the status of the

13. *IT*, December 15, 1996.

14. *Ibid.*, January 31, 1997.

15. Sikh political leadership since the early 1980s has been divided into four main categories: the moderates, radicals, democratic militants, and armed militants. For a discussion of the significance of these categories, see Singh, “Punjab Elections 1992.”

16. Gurharpal Singh, “The Punjab Problem in the 1990s: A Post-1984 Assessment,” *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 25:2 (July 1991), pp. 175–91.

17. For a discussion of the Sikh political system, see P. Wallace and S. Chopra, eds., *Political Dynamics of Punjab* (Amritsar: Department of Political Science, Guru Nanak Dev University, 1981), pp. 1–32.

18. *Hindu* (international ed., Madras), May 7, 1994.

AD(B) and, together with the success of the party in the May 1996 Lok Sabha elections, appeared to vindicate its slogan of “Panth, Punjab, and Punjabiati” (Sikh community, Punjab, and Punjabiness).¹⁹

The Campaign for PLA Elections and the Result

In the prelude to the PLA election campaign, nearly all political parties in the state felt it prudent to make seat adjustments with rivals in order to mitigate the large seat swings inherent in the first-past-the-post electoral system. The AD(B)’s base in the Sikh peasantry nicely complemented the BJP’s urban Hindu constituency. The Congress (I) was unable to attract a major partner and had to be content with the support of the CPI. The CPI(M) under the tutelage of Surjeet floated a much publicized “third front” that also included the Janata Dal and the Samajwadi Janata Dal. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a key player in the 1996 Lok Sabha elections, was unable to strike a deal with either the AD(B) or the Congress (I). It fought the election in alliance with AD(M), a remnant of AD(A).

The AD(B)’s manifesto for the elections was a mixture of rural populism and a reassertion of the demands predating the Rajiv-Longowal Accord, tempered with the need to emphasize Hindu-Sikh unity. The party pledged to fight for “true federalism as contained in the Anandpur Sahib Resolution of 1978.” This commitment included the repudiation of all previous accords on the adjudication of interstate river waters, the postponement of the Satluj-Yamuna Link project, the transfer of Chandigarh and other Punjabi speaking areas to the state, and the proposal to set up a human rights commission in the state. For the peasantry, the party promised free power to tubewells, free canal water for irrigation, and a hike in procurement prices of agricultural produces in line with the consumer price index. A range of other measures was also proposed to attract industry, encourage development, and enhance democratization. The manifesto concluded with the need to “maintain peace in Punjab at all costs.”²⁰

The Congress (I) in turn repudiated the ASR as secessionist but promised to work for the implementation of the Rajiv-Longowal Accord as the framework for resolving the outstanding issues of river waters, Chandigarh, and the Punjabi-speaking areas. As well as a proposal targeted at the poor and another supporting reservations (affirmative action) for women, the party sought to frighten voters by pronouncing that the Akalis had “formed a sui-

19. *Sunday Tribune*, February 16, 1997.

20. *Tribune* (daily, Chandigarh) January 28, 1997.

cide squad of one *lakh* [100,000] persons whose main target was to kill Hindus.”²¹

The BJP’s election manifesto echoed many of the AD(B) promises but differed in one significant respect: while maintaining its opposition to the ASR, the BJP proposed instead to implement the report of the Sarkaria Commission to increase powers to the states and stop the misuse of Article 356 (which gives the central government the power to dismiss state governments) that had perpetuated the “Congress raj.” In place of decentralization and federalism, the BJP document spoke of “devolution” consistent with the “unity and integrity of the country.” However, Atul Vajpayee insisted that this main policy disagreement between the two parties was not a major stumbling block: the AD(B) had, after all, committed itself to “guaranteeing peace, national integrity, and communal harmony.”²²

The election campaign itself was limited to two weeks. Almost 70,000 police personnel and 100,000 paramilitary forces were deployed across the state to ensure free, fair, and peaceful polling at 18,097 polling stations of which 1,057 were identified as “hypersensitive” and 2,744 as “sensitive.”²³ In spite of the heavy security personnel presence, electioneering was marked by the colorful campaigning traditionally associated with Indian elections, and turnout was high even in areas that had been the hotbeds of militancy. The strict enforcement of the Code of Conduct by the Election Commissioners resulted in, among other things, an alcohol ban during the campaign itself. In all, 693 candidates contested for the PLA elections (see Table 1).

The AD(B)-BJP alliance won a landslide victory by capturing 93 of 117 assembly seats and almost 48% of the votes polled. The AD(B) did particularly well in rural (70) and semi-rural (24) constituencies, making a virtual clean sweep of the Malwa region and with a strong showing in the Majha and the Doaba. The potential threat from AD(M) failed to materialize as that party secured only one seat despite fielding 29 candidates. The AD(B)’s share of the popular vote was slightly less than the record 38% achieved by Akali Dal (Longowal) in the “friendly” PLA elections of 1985.²⁴

The BJP also did better than was expected, winning its highest number of seats since linguistic reorganization. The party’s performance was strongest in urban and semi-urban constituencies where traditionally it has competed with the Congress (I) and the BSP. As the Hindu vote swung behind the BJP, the Congress (I)’s position was undermined by competition from the BSP. The overall percentage of the BJP share of the popular vote as compared to 1992 actually fell by nearly 6% because the party focused its efforts on mo-

21. *Ibid.*, January 29, 1997.

22. *Ibid.*

23. India News Network Digest (Bowling Green, Ohio), February 6, 1992.

24. *Ajit* (daily, Punjabi, Jalandhar), February 11, 1997.

TABLE 1 *Punjab Legislative Assembly Elections 1997*

Party	Candidates	Seats Won	% Vote Polled
Akali Dal (Badal)	92	75	37.2
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	22	18	10.6
Congress (I)	105	14	26.4
Bahujan Samaj Party	67	1	7.5
Communist Party of India (CPI)	14	2	2.9
Akali Dal (Mann)	29	1	2.9
Independents and others*	364	6	12.8
Total	693	117	100

SOURCES: *India Today* (February 28, 1997); *Tribune* (February 11, 1997); *Ajit* (February 11, 1997); and *Des Pardes* (February 21, 1997).

NOTE: Turnout: 69.9%.

* Others include the CPI(M), Janata Dal, Samajwadi Party, and the Samajwadi Janata Party.

bilizing the urban Hindu vote in 23 seats (including one contested by its Akali ally) that the Congress (I) had won in 1992.

The biggest loser of the elections was the Congress (I). Its share of seats collapsed from 87 in 1992 to 14; the party's share of the popular vote also fell dramatically to 26%. The Congress (I) was virtually wiped out in its traditional stronghold in the Doaba where its vote collapsed from nearly 40% in the Lok Sabha elections nine months earlier, to only 26.7%. Its performance in the Majha region was also unimpressive: many leading Congressmembers in the Majha actually refused to participate in the contest, and the party did not win a single seat. In the Malwa region the party relied heavily on localized support. It retained only 9 of the 63 seats in this area, and it won barely a quarter of the total vote. The expulsion of the Malwa-based former Chief Minister Brar just before the elections resulted in widespread dissent that allegedly undermined the party's position in some two dozen seats.²⁵

The minor parties were spectacularly unsuccessful. Whereas the Communist parties relied on localized support, the BSP was the main casualty of failing to ally with a major party before the elections. The party's share of seats collapsed from 9 in 1992 to 1 in 1997, and its share of the vote declined from 16.2% to 7.5%. Kanshi Ram, the BSP leader who had hoped to make himself the kingmaker between Congress (I) and the AD(B), proved to be particularly inept at managing to acquire an effective partner. Had he been able to do so, the state's 28% Dalit vote could have been decisive in deter-

25. *Tribune*, February 2, 1997; *Ajit*, February 11, 1997.

mining the outcome in at least 26 constituencies. In the event, the party's stance frustrated the Congress (I) and rewarded the BJP.

The BJP-Akali Dal(B) Alliance: Prospects for the Future

The AD(B)-BJP alliance's emphatic victory marks a decisive turning point in the configuration of political forces that have been party to the "Punjab problem." Previous efforts by the AD(B) and its predecessors to build a regional anti-Congress coalition have been frustrated by the regular defection from such coalitions by minor political parties—Communists and BSP—as well as the factional penetration of Akali legislators by the Congress (I). For the first time, the alignment of the AD(B) with a dominant anti-Congress (I) national party appears to foreclose the prospects of such a development while providing a model for the BJP to emulate in other states.

In contrast, because the Congress (I) and the minor parties in Punjab have always looked toward their patrons in New Delhi to influence events in Punjab, they are likely to lobby hard to make the life of the Akali-BJP administration difficult. No Akali administration has completed its full term and President's Rule has been regularly imposed to oust Akali governments. Given the strength of the AD(B) and the BJP, it is perhaps premature to assume that President's Rule will be imposed in the immediate future, especially as the Congress (I)'s defeat in Punjab was identified with Kesri's new national leadership. But as the Congress (I)'s influence extends over the national United Front government and the latter itself has imploded, the Congress (I) and the United Front leadership's temptation to interfere in Punjab will be difficult to resist—particularly if new national elections bring a Congress (I) government to power. In the last two decades, the pretext for such intervention has been the mismanagement of law and order by the state governments. In addition, the ministry's fortunes will be influenced by its ability to fulfil its economic promises, the resolution of the outstanding Punjab issues, and the short- and medium-term calculations of the alliance for regional and national power.

The issue of law and order was pushed to the fore within months after the coalition came to power. While in opposition, the AD(B) had promised a thorough review of the "security state" that had waged the war of counterinsurgency against militancy. In fact, as "violent control" was dismantled after 1995, individual petitions against police were heard with greater frequency in the High and Supreme Courts. Allegations against the Punjab police have accelerated; nearly 1,200 cases have been registered against serving police officers and one-sixth of the total police force is vulnerable to indictment.²⁶

26. *IT*, June 9, 1997.

This situation has arisen because political leaders have failed to find a settlement that would effectively end violent control. Such a settlement would necessarily include both compensation to victims and protection to security services. In the event, police officers who were at the forefront of counterinsurgency have, in the words of Gill, become the new victims in which “public interest litigation has become the most convenient strategy for vendetta.”²⁷ The suicide of former police officer A. S. Sandhu, who had waged a ruthless war against Sikh militancy in the border area, was taken up by Gill as a spokesman of the beleaguered police officers.²⁸ His call for a constitutional commission to examine the issue has been echoed by that of human rights organizations in Punjab seeking a parallel commission—along the lines of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission—to examine the whole dimension of counterinsurgency. The AD(B)-BJP government is committed to preserving law and order, and it is suspicious of the recent spate of bombings in Punjab. The government suspects that disgruntled elements within the security services may be playing the role of agents provocateurs they perfected during the counterinsurgency. Timely acts of terror have destabilized previous administrations in Punjab; the AD(B)-BJP alliance is very conscious of this fact as well as of Punjab’s history of the assassination of leading politicians.

The alliance has also had to confront, in its economic plans, the reality of a debt trap that has increased since the early 1990s. At the end of March 1996, the outstanding special loans debt to the center was nearly \$1.6 billion. Special pleas for cancellation of this loan notwithstanding, the previous Congress (I) administration succeeded in obtaining only a waiver in the annual interest payment on the loan of nearly \$213 million. Estimates suggest that this interest will increase to \$226 million in 1997–98 and rise to \$271 million in 2001–02.²⁹ Servicing this loan has created a fiscal debt ratio of nearly 30% for the Punjab government.³⁰ Against this high rate of indebtedness, the first budget introduced by the alliance in June 1997 actually increased taxes while the budget recorded an overall deficit of \$93.8 million. Apart from a few symbolic acts, such as reducing the police budget by Rs 270 million, little headway has been made in fulfilling the alliance’s generous promises to industry or agriculture.³¹ Perhaps most remarkable of all, the chief minister has been unable to secure an upward revision of agricultural procurement prices—set annually by the center—that have deflated agricultural incomes and are, for example in the case of wheat, considerably below the market

27. See K. P. S. Gill’s open letter to the prime minister, *Sunday Tribune*, June 1, 1997.

28. *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay) June 21, 1997.

29. *Sunday Tribune*, March 2, 1997.

30. *Ibid.*, March 23, 1997.

31. *Des Pardes*, June 20, 1997.

price.³² The initiative to set up a nonresident cell may increase the pitifully low level of non-resident Indian investment in the state, but it is unlikely to generate the resources required to meet the promises made to the agricultural sector or provide for further development. The debt trap, like the issue of law and order, will increase the vulnerability of the government to interference from the center.

Facing a high degree of indebtedness, the alliance, particularly the AD(B), may be inclined to revive the agitation for the settlement of outstanding Punjab demands over the transfer of Chandigarh, the Punjabi-speaking areas, and the river waters dispute. Such a mobilization, as in 1982, is vulnerable to outflanking by an ideological challenge by militants and radicals from within the Sikh political system. A challenge of this sort could become reality if the alliance were unable to deliver on these demands following such a mobilization. The vanquished and disgruntled factions within Sikhdom are eager to wage the ideological battle, and their fires might be easily stoked, as in the past, by a Congress (I) in opposition. An early indication of this became apparent in the *Akal Takht's* honoring of the families of assassins of Indira Gandhi and General Vaidya in April 1997.

For the BJP, in contrast, championing the Punjab demands is fraught with difficulties. Apart from being at odds with the AD(B) over the reform of center-state relations and the ASR, the party would have to placate its government in Rajasthan and partners in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh—who would be disadvantaged in any agreement favoring Punjab. The Congress (I) deliberately stalled on implementing the Rajiv-Longowal Accord for over a decade because of its fear of destabilizing Congress (I) governments in these states; the BJP is likely to follow suit given the *national* benefits of assuaging its units and allies in these states at the expense of the AD(B). Since 1985 no national government—even one with such an overwhelming majority as the Congress (I) under Rajiv Gandhi—has been able to deliver on the Rajiv-Longowal Accord. The commitment of any future national BJP to effect such a package must be seen against this background and the coded misgivings it expressed about the ASR.

If a national BJP government is able to deliver a Punjab package, there certainly would be potential for the AD(B)-BJP alliance to become strategic. The differences between the two parties may be overcome by political symbolism such as the BJP's support for AD(B)'s candidate (Surjit Singh Barnala) in the elections to the vice-presidency of India.³³ Political rhetoric, after all, is really the stuff of Indian politics; and if the BJP is twin tracking in a tactical accommodation of the AD(B) (and other regional parties) to capture

32. *Sunday Tribune*, February 23, 1997.

33. *IT*, July 14, 1997.

national power, then these parties and the AD(B) are aware of the potential bargaining power they can wield in New Delhi, as the recent formation of the BJP government and its National Agenda for Governance demonstrated. Yet, such independence for the AD(B) is unlikely to produce results given the record of non-BJP governments. In the long term, therefore, the strategic advantage to AD(B) of an alliance with the BJP lies in the possibility of the BJP, its rhetoric apart, giving it maximum room to satisfy the party's ambitions at the regional level and accommodate its ethnic pride without triggering a fratricidal factionalism within Sikhdom that has traditionally benefited the Congress (I). If there is a "growing realization within the BJP leadership that the objective of coming to power in New Delhi cannot be achieved until the party is ready to constructively integrate regional sentiments and aspirations,"³⁴ then regional sentiments will also determine the degree of accommodation as well as the BJP's agenda.³⁵ The paradox of the BJP's drive toward majoritarianism is that the party's ideological agenda may be practical only in its core "Hindi belt," yet its appeal must reach far beyond for national-level success.

Conclusion

It is tempting to see the AD(B)-BJP alliance as pragmatic, opportunistic, and tactical. In reality it has been forged as a consequence of the ideologically charged politics of violent control practiced by national and regional Congress (I) governments in Punjab that fostered Sikh militancy and, ultimately, castrated the political activities of Sikh moderates. Ideological differences notwithstanding—differences that are in many ways more apparent than real—the parties have much in common in shaping a new regional and national dimension to Indian politics. For the AD(B) the basis of this dimension is to establish regional political hegemony alongside the restoration of Sikh ethnic pride. The BJP's national project is to establish a new framework of hegemonic control that would promote *Hindutva* in place of the Congress (I)'s "pseudo-secularism." Both parties may well be excluded from political office by the powerful political combinations arrayed against them. But whereas the Punjab model of alignment with a regional party offers the BJP a tantalizing vision of power in New Delhi, the physical elimination of militant Sikh nationalism in the early 1990s has fostered in the AD(B) a new realism that sees the BJP as offering the best hope for maintaining a distinct Sikh identity and achieving maximum political autonomy within the Indian union.

34. *Sunday Tribune*, February 23, 1997.

35. For a recent statement of the BJP on center-state relations, see *IT*, July 9, 1997.