

BJP'S BID TO MAKE ITS MARK IN PUNJAB

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Even as the controversy surrounding its nomenclature continues, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on December 26 participated in the 'Veer Bal Diwas' programme in Delhi, to mark the martyrdom of Sahibzadas Baba Zorawar Singh and Baba Fateh Singh – the sons of Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru.

Earlier this year, the Prime Minister had announced that December 26 would be observed as 'Veer Bal Diwas'; this among a few other moves was seen as an attempt by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to garner the support of the Sikh community as the party intends to expand its political base in Punjab, after its alliance with its oldest partner Shiromani Akali Dal (Dal) broke in 2020.

With the 2024 parliamentary election inching closer, the BJP seems to be working on two fronts. First, as part of its expansion plan at the regional level, it is trying to build a 'pro-Sikh' image in Punjab while trying to neutralise its 'anti-peasant' image created during the farmers' agitation. Second, at the national level, the party is trying to convey a larger message of not being anti-minority.

Also, by expressing closeness to the Sikh community, a message is silently being delivered that Sikhs are an associated religion with Hindus. However, the radical Sikhs have strongly raised objections. Dal Khalsa – the radical outfit asserting that the state should stay away from religious affairs of Sikhs has termed the nomenclature of 'Veer Bal Diwas' an arbitrary decision by the Prime Minister's Office. The outfit said that the move "...will further escalate tension between Amritsar and Delhi."

In his speech at the 'Veer Bal Diwas' programme, the Prime Minister while referring to the fact that 'Panj Pyare' (five beloved ones, who have a special place in Sikhism) came from all parts of the country, exuded pride that one of the 'Panj Pyara' was from Dwarka, land from where he hails.

The BJP is in expansion mode in Punjab and wants to capture the space vacated by the Congress and SAD. Over the years, the BJP had been contesting the electoral battle in Punjab as a 'junior partner' in alliance with the SAD. But after the SAD quit the alliance, the BJP has been busy expanding in the State. To this effect, it inducted several Sikh 'faces' in the party including former Chief Minister Amarinder Singh. While in alliance with the SAD, the BJP's

electoral base had largely been confined to the urban areas in Punjab, but by attempting to woo the Sikhs — especially the landowning and numerically strong Jat Sikh community, the party is trying to make inroads into rural Punjab.

The BJP has been persuasively informing the public through public rallies and other platforms about several decisions taken in the interest of Sikhs since 2014 when it formed government at the Centre. Setting up a Special Investigation Team to probe the 1984 anti-Sikh riots cases, the initiative taken to start the Kartarpur corridor, waiving of Goods and Services Tax (GST) from 'langar' (community kitchen), granting Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) registration to Gurdwara Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) are a few decisions the party has been taking credit for.

As the controversy surrounding the nomenclature of 'Veer Bal Diwas' continues, the SAD, which claims to be the sole representative of the Sikh (Panthic) community, has been trying to latch onto the opportunity. The SAD faced a drubbing in the 2022 Punjab Assembly election. The party fared poorly in the recently concluded Sangrur bypoll too.

While expressing gratitude towards the Prime Minister, SAD MP Harsimrat Kaur Badal urged Mr. Modi to name the tribute to the sacrifice of Sahibzadas (sons) of Guru Gobind Singh in a manner that symbolises the Panthic values and in tune with the heritage of 'Khalsa Panth'.

She requested the Prime Minister to listen to the plea of Akal Takht and accept the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC)'s recommendation to name it as 'Shahibzade Shahadat Diwas' instead of 'Veer Bal Diwas' to resonate with Sikh ethos.

The politics on the nomenclature may resonate for a while, but with the BJP looking aggressive in its approach to expand in Punjab, the Opposition political parties will have to be watchful.

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